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029
When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace
4

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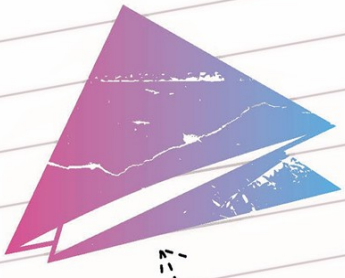

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CHARACTERS

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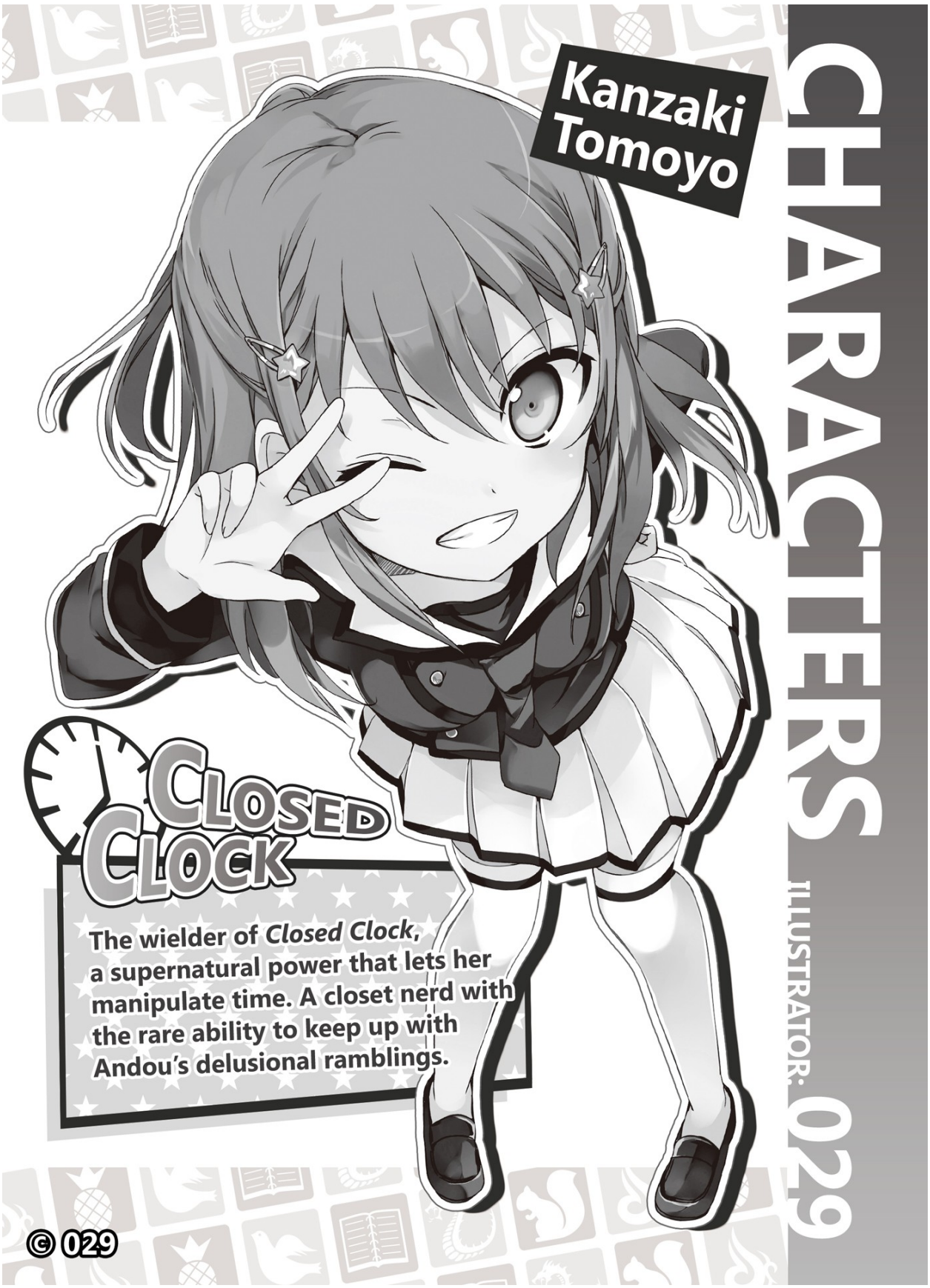
Kanzaki Tomoyo
Closed Clock
The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

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Kushikawa Hatoko
A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.
OVER ELEMENT
DARK AND DARK
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.
Andou Jurai
Takanashi Sayumi
The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.
ROUTE OF ORIGIN
WORLD CREATE
A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.
Himeki Chifuyu

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Chapter 1: Learning, and an Overture

I was eight years old when we lost our grandmother. She passed away after an extended illness.

My little sister was so young at the time that I imagine she barely recalls our grandmother, but I remember her well. She was a strong woman, proud and stern. In spite of her white hair and the countless wrinkles on her face, she didn't strike me as elderly in the least. She had spirit and vitality to spare; she walked with drive, purpose, and perfect posture wherever she went. I was always drawn to her inherent nobility. I thought she was incredible.

"Miss Sayumi," she'd call me. Always "Miss," even though I was her very own granddaughter. I imagine most people would think that show of formality to be oddly distant of her, but it never struck me as strange at all. I came to understand at a very early age that it was simply how my grandmother chose to conduct herself. Whether she was speaking to an infant, to her granddaughter, or to anyone else, she never neglected to show someone the respect she believed they deserved. Fastidious humbleness was her way of life.

"Miss Sayumi," she would say, "you must become a person who is worthy of praise." It was practically a catchphrase for her, one she maintained even after she fell ill. "Become a person who is worthy of praise. So long as you do, then surely…"

They weren't her last words, and she didn't leave them behind as her dying wish. Nevertheless, they left their mark upon me and occupied a very special place within my heart. I would become a person worthy of praise. I would live my life to rise to that standard.

But tell me, grandmother—what does it mean to be worthy of praise? What does it mean to be the way you're meant to be*?*

☆

In the Japanese language, certain characters can be read in different ways depending on context. Take, for instance, "gen," a character found in all sorts of words, like "genmai," meaning brown rice, and "genbugan," meaning basalt. Though "gen" is the common reading for the character, it's sometimes read as "kuro" instead—take the word "kurouto," meaning an expert, for a common example.

It goes deeper than just the alternate readings, though. "Gen," you see, is a character that also represents the color black! Consider the Chinese guardian animals of the four cardinal directions; the name of the Guardian of the North—commonly known as the Black Tortoise—is Genbu, written using that very same "gen" character.

Long story short: "gen" equals black. Once you come to that conclusion, the whole world is cast in a brand new light! For instance…

"Isn't 'Sugita Genpaku,' like, the coolest friggin' name ever?!"

“Nobody cares, chuuni-boy!”

I felt a light smack on my head. *Somebody* had thwacked me with the edge of their notebook, and I knew exactly who it was. I looked up from the history textbook I’d been reading and turned around to face her.

“C’mon, Tomoyo, just *look* at this name! Genpaku? Seriously?! How does it get any cooler than that?! The guy *has* to have been the pride of the Sugita family! The black of ‘gen’ and the white of ‘paku,’ put together in a single name! That’s the sort of name you give a man who holds all the light and darkness of the world within the palm of his hand!”

“Whoa, c-cut it out! Stop shoving your textbook in my face! That portrait of him’s actually really creepy up close, so get it away from me!”

“It’s the name of a tough, grizzled survivor who lives in a world of black and white, I’m telling you! Whoever came up with that name was a stand-up individual and a scholar, for sure!”

“Where do you get off judging whoever named Genpaku like that?! If you’re gonna judge anyone, judge *him*!”

“Andou?” said Sayumi, sliding into our little back-and-forth. “It’s not every day that we get together to study like this, so I would appreciate it if you’d refrain from derailing us at every chance you get. I won’t tell you not to make small talk, but at the absolute least, try to make it small talk that has something to do with the subject you’re studying,” she scolded.

“Okaaay,” I droned.

It was early July. Summer had arrived, our winter uniforms were a rapidly fading memory, and we of the literary club had come together to get some real studying done. However, there weren’t any tests coming up anytime soon, and none of us had done poorly enough to earn ourselves remedial lessons. In fact, our midterms had *just* ended, and finals were far off in the future.

So, why had we decided to hold a study group in spite of all that? Simple: when Chifuyu arrived at the club room on that particular day, she’d declared, “I’m going to do homework today.” The rest of us had simply decided to follow her example. As such, none of us were exactly at our most motivated. It was a nice, relaxing, low-stress study day.

“Something to talk about that has to do with what we’re studying, huh?” I mumbled. “Okay, then, uhh... Ah! Sugita Genpaku was the guy who translated the *Tafel Anatomie*, right?”

“I mean...that’s not *wrong*,” said Tomoyo, rolling her eyes, “but couldn’t you just say he was the guy who translated the *Kaitai Shinsho*? I know it was a Dutch text and all, but literally nobody calls it by its original name these days!”

She had a point, but it was too late. In my mind, Sugita Genpaku was firmly cemented as the *Tafel Anatomie* guy. I mean, come on, just trying saying it—*Tafel Anatomie*! Now *that’s* a name with *impact*! I couldn’t tell you what it is about the name that gives it such a delightful ring, and I

definitely couldn't tell you what it actually means, but oh, did it ever stir my soul with its sweet succor!

"Sink into the monochromatic depths of a black-and-white nightmare—*Tafel Anatomie*!"

"Stop muttering special move speeches to yourself! It's super friggin' creepy!"

"Ah. Sorry, my bad. Just couldn't help but practice my Sugita Genpaku impression there."

"Sugita Genpaku *never* said that!"

"Oh, is that *so*? Wow, Tomoyo, I didn't know that *you* were close, personal friends with good ol' Genny!"

"Don't call him that! And no, I'm not, but I still know for a fact that he didn't! If Sugita Genpaku had a ridiculously over-the-top special move like *that*, it'd turn history on its head!" Tomoyo bellowed.

"Incidentally, 'tafel anatomie' means 'table of anatomy' in Dutch," Sayumi added helpfully.

Oh, huh. I had no idea. I was kind of disappointed that it meant something so perfectly mundane, not gonna lie. It was such a letdown, in fact, that I decided to drop the subject and go back to quietly studying…

…for about thirty seconds, until an uncontrollable surge of enthusiasm welled up within me once again! "*Tafel Anatomie*! No, that's not right. I've gotta, like, thrust my arm out first…*Tafel Anatomie*! And its even *more* advanced form—*Tafel Anatomie Castella*! Wait…castella *is* Dutch, right?"

"What the hell are you *doing* over there?!" snapped Tomoyo, yanking me back into the real world.

"Oh, jeez, that was close! Think I got possessed by Sugita Genpaku for a minute there. Almost went and Spirit Integrated with the guy!"

"Again, that's not a thing Sugita Genpaku would do!"

"*Andou*?" a frigid voice rang out, sending chills down my spine. Sayumi had warned me again and again, and I'd promptly ignored her each time. Now she was giving me a mirthless smile that told me I was in big, *big* trouble.

"S-Sayumi…no, wait, just let me explain myself! It wasn't *my* fault! See, good ol' Genny went and—"

"You're surprisingly good at doing impressions, aren't you, Andou?"

"Huh?" That threw me for a loop. I'd been so sure she was about to give me the chewing out of a lifetime that this felt sort of anticlimactic in comparison. "A-Am I? Didn't think I was *that* good, or—"

"Why don't you do another impression for us?" said Sayumi, cutting me off again.

"O-Okay, sure," I replied. This was another surprise—I *definitely* wasn't expecting her to start making unreasonable demands. That smile and unblinking stare of hers told me that there was absolutely no way I was getting out of it, though. I couldn't afford to hesitate. I had to go *all out*. It was time for me to bust out the best impression I could possibly manage!

“Excellent,” said Sayumi. “In that case, do Newton, please.”

Hmm. Newton, is it? I turned my gaze upward, staring pensively into the boughs of an imaginary apple tree. As I watched an imaginary apple plummet down toward me, I mumbled in shock and disbelief, my expression the spitting image of a man whose most trusted comrade had just betrayed him to join forces with an evil organization.

“Have you fallen, apple?!”

“Since when did Newton talk like some sort of badass?!” jabbed Tomoyo.

“He did, trust me! I’m *positive* Newton said something along those lines at some point.”

“He didn’t do it at the end of the Soul Society Arc, that’s for damn sure!”

“All right, then. Who to have you imitate next…” said Sayumi, paying no mind to our antics. “How about…Commodore Perry?”

Ooh, Perry, is it? Mister Black Ships himself! I stood up from my chair, held my palm out before me, and spoke in such a majestic, solemn tone of authority I could almost see the holy aura radiating from behind me.

“Open thy ports unto me!”

“Since when did Perry talk like *God*?!” shouted Tomoyo.

“I mean, I bet it would’ve been really easy for him to force Japan to open up to the outside world if he had!”

“I’m not exactly an expert on the subject, but I’m *pretty* sure the process that the Japanese government had to go through to open the country up was a *little* more complicated than that!”

“Okay, Andou, do the Wright brothers next,” said Sayumi.

Ooh, now that’s an interesting one. They were the ones who invented the airplane, right? I spread my arms wide open and took a step forward.

“Up, up, and away!”

“Oh, come *on*, could you *get* any cheesier?! That is *not* something you’d hear from people who’re trying to build an airplane! That’s the sort of thing you hear from kids who think you can *actually* fly by manipulating your chi!”

“Have I fallen?!”

“You’re going right back to Newton?! And of *course* you’ve fallen, ’cause flying doesn’t actually work like that!”

“Do Marie Antoinette next, Andou,” said Sayumi. She really wasn’t giving me even a moment to rest.

G-Gimme a second! I’m running seriously low on references here…

“Andou? Marie Antoinette. I’m waiting.”

“Marie, Marie… O-Oh no, my cavities, how they pain me!”

“Because you ate too much cake, I suppose? Napoleon next.”

“Umm… O-Oh, god, I only got four hours of sleep last night! Man, I’m *so* sleep deprived! Four hours of sleep, I swear!”

“Oda Nobunaga, during the Honnouji Incident.”

“…It burns!”

“Queen Himiko.”

“*H-Himiko*? Uhh, umm… It’s time for a Yamatai★Night Party!”

“The Tenpo Reforms, as a belligerent teenager.”

“As a *what*?! Umm, er, umm… I can’t *take* this anymore! People *always* mix me up with the Kyoho Reforms and the Kansei Reforms! I’m *me*, not *them*!”

“The Tokugawa Shogunate, as a little girl.”

“…Bweeeh! You can’t ovathwow my shogunate! It’s not *fair*!”

“The Achaemenid Persian Empire, extremely homoerotically.”

“Hey, Achaemenid, is that a Persia in your pants, or are you… Okay, no, I’m sorry, I got nothing.”

I’d hit my limit. Couldn’t spend a second longer in Sayumi’s hell of impressions. Honestly, the whole thing had gone off the rails the moment she’d started asking for personifications of historical events.

“I hope you’ve learned your lesson and will actually focus on your studies now,” said Sayumi.

“Kaaay,” I droned, dejectedly turning back to my work. I pored over my textbook, but it wasn’t long before I found myself glancing over at Hatoko and Chifuyu.

“Teach me how to solve this, Hatoko,” Chifuyu commanded.

“Okay, sure! Let’s see, let’s see…this one? ‘Takashi is driving a car. He starts at his house and drives at fifty kilometers an hour. How far away from his house will Takashi be after one and a half hours?’ Ooh, a speed problem! I see!”

“Speed is complicated.”

“Well, think about it this way: if he’s driving at fifty kilometers an hour, that means that after one hour, he’ll be fifty kilometers away from his house! He drove for one and a half hours, though, so we have to multiply fifty by one and a half, which gives us—”

“But, Hatoko,” said Chifuyu, a look of utter confusion upon her face, “what about the traffic lights?”

“Huh?”

“If there are traffic lights in the way, you have to stop and start again sometimes. You can’t drive at fifty kilometers an hour all the time.”

“Th-That’s *true*, yes, but if we assume you *don’t* have to think about traffic lights, we can just—”

“Is Takashi running red lights?”

“I-I, uhh… I *guess* he probably would be…?”

“He can’t do that. It’s illegal.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right! It sure is!”

“So we have to put the traffic lights into the equation…” Chifuyu crossed her arms and fell deep into thought. A few seconds of brow-furrowed concentration later, her face lit up. “Got it! The answer is ‘Takashi’s real name is Yoshio’!”

“What equation did you use to get *that* answer?!”

“Okay, done with homework.”

“Ch-Chifuyu, nooo! You’re not done yet at all!” moaned Hatoko, who was getting a little teary-eyed at that point. Chifuyu’s thought process was simply too free-spirited for the average person to keep up with, and Hatoko just couldn’t handle it.

It was interesting—both Chifuyu and Hatoko had a certain spontaneous, airheaded quality to their personalities, but there was definitely something subtle that distinguished how they each manifested it. The best way I could put it into words was that Hatoko was spacey, while Chifuyu was a space alien. Her train of thought drove on a *wildly* different set of rails than the rest of humanity’s. She was a mystery among mysteries.

At that point, a pang of curiosity hit me. “Come to think of it, what are your grades like, Chifuyu?” I asked.

“Mnh? Normal,” replied Chifuyu.

“That doesn’t really give much perspective, huh…? Okay, let me put it this way—how’d you do on your most recent test?”

“We had a math test a little while ago. I got a zero.”

“Ahh, gotcha, gotcha! A zero, huh? Yeah, I guess that *is* pretty norm—You got a *what*?!” I yelped, so shocked that I cut *myself* off midsentence. “A *zero*? Like...seriously?”

“Super serious,” said Chifuyu with an inexplicably self-satisfied nod.

Zero points? Is that even possible? Even the comically stupid characters in manga always manage to earn a couple points these days! Zero points is just off the table, unless your name’s Nobita!

“Uh, Chifuyu? Please don’t tell me you get zero points on *all* your tests,” I said.

“Nah. I got a hundred points on the test before that.”

“A full score?! Wait, what subject was that test in?”

“The same. Math. And the test before *that*, I got a zero.”

“You really swing to some wild extremes, huh?” How on earth does she go that all or nothing with her test scores? Being decisive’s all well and good, but that’s taking it a step too far! I can’t tell if she’s super smart, or super dumb, or what!

“My brain works way better on some days than others,” explained Chifuyu. “It depends on how I feel, and what sort of mood I’m in, and stuff.”

The way she described it almost made it feel like she’d somehow *transcended* common sense. I had to wonder, *Is this how it feels to talk to one of history’s most eminent figures while they’re still a kid?* Because talking with her genuinely made me feel like I was getting a glimpse into the childhood of a girl who’d go on to remake the world in her image! They said that Edison was a real free spirit himself back during his school days, after all.

“What’re your grades like, Andou?” asked Chifuyu, her eyes full of curiosity.

“Mine? Eh, pretty normal, I guess. Maybe the upper end of average?” I answered, neither talking myself up nor putting myself down.

Chifuyu glanced over at Hatoko for a moment, then looked back at me. “Okay, then who’s smarter? You or Hatoko?”

“Huh...I dunno, actually. Hey, Hatoko, which of us ranked higher on the midterms again?”

“I was thirty-second in our grade,” said Hatoko.

“Ah, you beat me. I got thirty-eighth.”

Hatoko and I had always scored pretty much the same on our tests. We didn’t treat each other as rivals or anything of the sort. We just made a habit of studying together every time test season came around, and we ended up with similar grades as a natural result.

“So, you’re both the same amount of smart,” said Chifuyu, sounding like she was jotting the fact down internally for future reference.

“Yup, that’s about right,” I replied. “At this rate, I figure we’ll probably end up going to the same college too.”

“Right?” said Hatoko. “I’d love to go to the same college as you, Juu.”

“Sounds good to me. Always nice to have someone you know around.”

Suddenly, our rather bland moment of small talk was interrupted by the clattering of a chair. I looked over to find Tomoyo standing bolt upright, giving me a look of utter shock and horror.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Tomoyo?” I asked.

“W-W-Wait a second... *Huh*?” said Tomoyo, holding a hand out in a “give me a minute to process this” sort of pose. She looked *really* shaken up. “A-Andou...your grades are *that* good?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess. I never mentioned it?”

“No, you *didn’t*,” Tomoyo moaned, clutching at her head. “*Seriously*...? That *can’t* be true, right? I knew Hatoko is smart, but *him*...? How could *Andou* be smarter than... Ah, I mean, n-no, umm,” she stammered, working herself up into a feverish panic.

Just then, Chifuyu rejoined the conversation with a single deathly calm word. “Tomoyo?”

“Huh?”

“What was your midterm rank?”

“M-My rank?! I, I got, umm...” Tomoyo babbled, her voice cracking into a falsetto as her gaze darted wildly across the room. Chifuyu, however, kept her pure, innocent gaze fixed directly on Tomoyo until she finally gave in and mumbled, “...eighty-eighth...” as quietly as she could manage.

“Oh, is that all?” I said. “You had me expecting way worse! You’re right in the middle of the pack! Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Our high school had its students choose whether to focus on the humanities or the sciences starting in their second year. Everyone in the literary club—even Sayumi—had chosen to go into the humanities course. The grade rankings were separated by course, and there were roughly two hundred second-years in the humanities, meaning that Tomoyo was actually slightly above the middle of our class. Her grades were perfectly average.

“Tomoyo, you’re dumber than Andou,” said Chifuyu, calmly and coolly twisting the knife. Tomoyo let out a strangled gasp, shuddered violently, then crumpled to her hands and knees. She was so horribly shaken by the news that, frankly, I was a little offended.

“I’ll never live down this shame,” Tomoyo muttered disconsolately.

“Oh, come *on*, you don’t have to get that down about it!” I replied. “Who *cares* if my grades are a little better than yours?”

“*I* care, and I can’t stand it! I’m beneath *you*? That puts me on the same level as, what, *fleas*? ‘Dumber than Andou’? Seriously? That’s gotta count as a slur, right? You’re not supposed to *say* those things...”

“Is it really *that* bad? Yeesh.” Apparently, in Tomoyo’s mind, I was the one person she could absolutely not let herself lose to under any circumstances. She was perfectly fine with being the second dumbest creature in the world so long as I was the first. *What are we, a certain grappler and his stupidly OP father?*

Tomoyo tottered to her feet, then closed in on me. “Why the *hell* are your grades that good, anyway?!” she shouted. “You spend all your time making crap up and acting like a moron! What, were you studying in secret on top of all that?!”

“See, the thing is, as long as your grades are decent enough, the faculty don’t give you too hard of a time no matter *what* you do,” I explained. “That’s why I make sure to study up.”

“Wow, just like how Ichigo gets good grades to keep ‘the faculty’ from judging him for having orange hair! I’m sure that comparison doesn’t have *anything* to do with why you’d pick *that* as your excuse!”

I gotta say, I was pretty impressed that Tomoyo realized I was going for the Ichigo comparison just because I called them “the faculty” instead of “our teachers” or whatever. *I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have her around to pick out all those deep cuts!*

“Look,” I said, “there’s no point obsessing over your grades in the first place, really! Nobody’s going to care what your report card looked like once you’re out in the demon world!”

“You mean the *real* world! Though I guess they probably wouldn’t care in the demon world either, when you put it that way... And anyway, I don’t wanna hear that from a guy who gets *good* grades...”

“I mean, say what you will, but I *do* actually study when it all comes down to it! It’s pretty fun sometimes, honestly. Especially English—you gotta study up on *that* for the sake of your future, no doubt about it!”

“‘For the sake of your future’?” said Tomoyo, gaping at me. “Y-You’re kidding me. Andou, are you actually trying to give me *serious advice...*?”

“After all, I’ve got big plans to start suddenly talking in English out of nowhere when the power slumbering within me awakens someday in the future!”

“*Oh*, good. You’re the same old Andou after all,” sighed Tomoyo. She sounded relieved, for whatever reason.

“Oh, and don’t forget about math either! After all, it won’t be long before the Japanese state is dominated by psychics, all of its citizens have their latent supernatural powers awakened, and your mental processing power becomes your absolute greatest asset!”

Tomoyo heaved a sigh. “What is it with you chuunis and obsessing over your ‘mental processing power,’ anyway?”

The answer was simple, really: calling it “mental processing” instead of just “mental math” elevates the term from the realm of the mundane into the realm of magical science! Sci-fi stories involving psychics work it into their power systems all the time, and you sometimes even see it in high fantasy, where wizards use staves or gemstones to amplify their mental calculations! Long story short, mental processing: *hella* cool!

“Do you even know what ‘processing,’ like, actually *means* in this context?” asked Tomoyo.

“Ugh… It, well, I mean, y’know! It’s, like, really complicated math or something…” C’mon, Tomoyo, if you have to call me out, you could at least be less nitpicky about it! The feel is more important than the petty details when it comes to this sorta stuff!

“What other subjects are important…?” I mused. “Oh, y’know Tao Ren’s catchphrase, ‘I shall not waver’? I thought that was so cool, I ended up learning all about that sort of archaic speech!”

“Never thought *Shaman King* would have *that* effect on someone…”

“Never managed to get into, like, full-on classical literature, though. Maybe if I read something with a really cool character who talked in classical Japanese when they snapped, I’d be able to work up the motivation to study up on it.”

“You really do decide whether or not to study stuff based solely on whether or not you think it’s cool, don’t you? And I actually *lost* to a guy with study habits like that…”

The deathly pall looming over Tomoyo darkened once more. She was even more frustrated to lose to me than I’d thought. Thankfully for her, around that point, Chifuyu’s inquisitive instincts turned their focus to a new target.

“Where did you place on the tests, Sayumi?”

“Oh, me? This time, I placed second in my class,” Sayumi answered.

Second?! Now *that* was a shocking number. I mean, it made sense, don’t get me wrong. The fact that Sayumi had placed so highly wasn’t shocking at all—just the number itself.

“Sayumi, you’re amazing!” said Chifuyu, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

“It wasn’t as big of a deal as you’re making it sound,” replied Sayumi. “And besides, if anyone’s amazing, it’s Miss Kudou. She’s the one who placed first.”

“Huh? Kudou did? For real?” I asked reflexively.

Sayumi nodded. “She did, yes. Regrettably, she defeated me this time around.”

Daaang, seriously? Kudou Mirei, the president of the student council, was clearly an even more impressive person than I'd given her credit for.

"Wait, you said 'this time around'? Does that mean…?"

"Last year I placed first, yes," Sayumi nonchalantly admitted.

From the sound of things, she and Kudou had been warring over first place in their grade for quite some time. Both of them were the sort of person who didn't go out of their way to boast about their abilities, so I'd had no idea. *I guess if you have the brainpower to get the best grades in your year, the humility to not make a big deal out of it comes naturally or something.*

"You and Kudou are *both* amazing!" said Chifuyu. Then she crossed her arms and fell into thought again. "Sayumi is second, Hatoko is thirty-second, Andou's thirty-eighth, and Tomoyo's eighty-eighth…"

Finally, Chifuyu's musings came to an end. She spun around and pointed her finger directly at a certain member of our club.

"Tomoyo, you're the dumbest!"

"*Whaaa*?!" screamed Tomoyo, recoiling in shock. *Jeez, Chifuyu, merciless much?* "I-I'm smarter than you are, at least!"

"I'm in elementary school, though."

"Ugh!"

"Tomoyo, you're a high schooler."

"Ugggh!"

"Youth wins."

"Uggghhh, ugaaahhhhhh!"

And so, Tomoyo was utterly vanquished by a grade schooler. Frankly, she lost the second she decided to drag Chifuyu into the competition.

"That's *it*! I'm studying! I'm studying my *ass* off! I *refuse* to let Andou score higher than me on our finals!" shouted Tomoyo. I was sorta expecting her to mope, but instead, she cracked open her textbook with renewed vigor.

"Your motives aside, studying is certainly a good thing," said Sayumi, closing the book on Tomoyo's torment. The rest of us followed her example and returned to our studies.

Two hours later...

"Man, now *that* was a productive session!" I declared, setting down my notebook and stretching. We had just a few minutes left before our club activities were scheduled to end for the day, and it felt like I'd managed to concentrate pretty nicely, but for some reason, I felt weirdly stressed, both physically and emotionally. "One must set foot onto the battlefield to truly feel alive, it would seem!"

"Quit trying to make it sound like you're some sorta big, badass fighter who hasn't had a brawl in way too long!" snapped Tomoyo.

"Whoops! My bad, my bad. I shouldn't let myself drift back to those days of blood and glory, huh? No, this is a peaceful world…a world in which I, a

man who only knows how to fight, have no way to prove my worth. Heh! Such is the tragic fate of the Asura…”

“Just checking—can you explain what, specifically, an Asura is?” Tomoyo asked.

“Huh? No, but, I mean…*you* know what they are! They’re, like, demons that live to fight, or something like that… Y’know, it’s written like the ‘shura’ in *Oreshura*!”

“I cannot *believe* I get worse grades than this dumbass,” sighed Tomoyo, slumping forward and planting her head in her hands.

I decided that we could write off the whole Asura definition as one of those things you just kinda have to get a feel for and moved the conversation along. “Okay, but as far as not having fought in a long time goes, it really *has* been ages since our last supernatural battle, right?”

We had awakened to our powers roughly half a year ago, after which we had spent day after day *not* getting dragged into any epic conflicts, *not* getting summoned away to other worlds, and, generally speaking, living our lives without any change whatsoever, for better or worse. I wasn’t dissatisfied with my lifestyle by any means…but I had to admit that deep down, part of me *was* hoping for, well, *something*.

“I mean, that time we threw down with Kudou was our last real battle, right?” I continued.

“I guess, though whether or not that actually counted as a battle is definitely up for debate,” said Tomoyo.

“Maaan, at this rate, me vs. Kudou Mirei’s gonna end up being my first *and* last supernatural battle ever,” I moaned. Now *that* was a truth that was hard to swallow.

“Huh? It can’t be your first and last battle, though,” Hatoko piped up.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” I asked, turning to her.

“You’d already been in a supernatural battle before you fought Kudou.”

“What? When did I… N-No way! Has my alternate personality been taking over and getting into fights without my knowledge?! Has my dark side finally decided to reveal itself?!”

“No, no, not like that!” said Hatoko, dousing the flames of excitement that had suddenly welled up within me. “You and Sayumi fought way before that, didn’t you?”

“Oh…right, that,” I said.

“I suppose that *did* happen, didn’t it?” agreed Sayumi. The two of us exchanged glances and slightly strained smiles.

“Wow, yeah, that takes me back,” muttered Tomoyo, her gaze distant. “The two of you *really* threw down back then.”

“Hey! Don’t call it a throwdown! That was an honorable duel!” I snapped. “We each fought with our pride on the line—it was a holy war, the likes of which none would dare to defile! Right, Sayumi?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Sayumi replied. “If memory serves, it was rather too dirty and undignified for me to call it a holy war.”

Ugh! Okay, yeah, I did sorta end up slathered with dirt and mud by the end of it…

In any case, Hatoko was right. I'd thought for the longest time that our encounter with Kudou was my very first battle, but in retrospect, I *did* have one with Sayumi long before that. Back when our powers had first awakened—when we'd faced each other down in no-holds-barred combat, each fighting for the sake of an ideal we weren't willing to back down on.

It was a proper supernatural battle, and we each used our powers to the fullest. *Dark and Dark* clashed head-on with *Route of Origin*, and in doing so, we determined whose power truly reigned supreme. As for who that victor was…

"Man…good times, huh?"

"You could say that, yes," replied Sayumi with a chuckle.

Looking back on it, I sort of got the feeling that I'd clashed an awful lot with our beloved and highly esteemed club president, Takanashi Sayumi. Our history of conflict began, in fact, on the very day I was admitted to our school and met her for the first time…

Chapter 2: Cleaning, with a Side of Memories

If I were asked to describe my first impression of Andou Jurai in a single word, I could do so easily enough—I'd go with "awful."

We had first met in April, one year prior.

"Kanzaki Tomoyo, Kushikawa Hatoko, and Andou…hmm? How would you read this name?"

School had ended for the day, and I, a newly promoted second-year student, was sitting in my classroom, looking through a set of membership application forms. My club advisor, Miss Satomi, had passed them to me earlier in the day, and each one represented a first-year student who wanted to join the literary club.

"I *assume* it's most likely read 'Toshiki'?" I mused as I glanced through a first-year boy's application. It was one of only three that I'd received—in other words, the club had only three prospective applicants that year. We were, to say the least, a chronically short-staffed organization. I was the only second-year in the club, and there were no third-years at all. The only two other members had both graduated a month beforehand, which left me as the club's sole remaining occupant.

It's a tragic story, really…though personally, I couldn't bring myself to be especially sad about it. Frankly, I'd never been especially attached to the literary club in the first place. I had gotten along well with my two seniors, to be sure, but with them having graduated, there wasn't much left for me there.

I assumed that in all likelihood, nobody would join and the club would be disbanded or suspended. It would be a shame to lose my after-school reading sanctuary, but I accepted there was simply nothing that I could do about it…that is, until not one, but *three* applications arrived on my desk. I hadn't even gone to the trouble of trying to drum up interest for the club, but somehow, they came to me anyway.

I could only assume that the guiding hand of fate was at work. It seemed I'd need to carry on my duties as the literary club's president at least a little while longer—of course, I'd only be presiding over the club until October, in any case.

"Now then," I said to myself, sweeping up the applications and standing up. It was time to head over to the club room. After all, one of the new applicants could very well have decided to show up that day, and it was my duty as both their senior and the club president to arrive on time.

What sort of people will join? I felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension as I strolled through the hallways…only to find a remarkably peculiar individual standing outside of my club room. It was a boy—a student, clearly—and he was leaning up against the club room's door, his

arms crossed in a display of casual arrogance. He and I were roughly the same height, incidentally.

"Mwa ha ha… You've certainly kept me waiting," he said with a sneer.

I was immediately struck by how he had gone out of his way to *say* the words "mwa ha ha." It was an almost unbelievably unnatural way to laugh.

"I take it that you're the master of this domain?" asked the boy, gesturing at the club room with his thumb.

Its "master"? Is he asking me whether or not I'm the club president? That was the most reasonable explanation I could come up with, so I silently nodded, keeping my expression perfectly neutral.

"Good. In that case, know that circumstances beyond even *my* control have forced me to make this place my stronghold for the time being. And please, don't ask me *why*—not if you value your life, anyway."

I didn't reply. I'm quite certain that the expression on my face was as skeptical as expressions could possibly be. In fact, I'm confident it was the exact same face I'd make if I ran into some unidentifiable cryptid out in the wilderness.

"Oh, of course! I haven't introduced myself! My mistake," said the boy, in spite of the fact that I hadn't asked. "My name is Andou Jurai."

Oh? I see now. I'd had my suspicions from the moment I noticed him waiting outside the club room, but now there was no doubt about it: he really was the boy with the unusually written first name whose application I'd glanced over shortly beforehand. *So, it's read "Jurai," then? Interesting.*

"Mwa ha ha! Of course, that's not my *true* name! No, it's merely an alias! After all, my *true* name is—"

"Move."

I had no idea why the strange, cryptic mess of a man before me would introduce himself by an alias only to use his real name literally seconds later, and I didn't particularly care to find out. I cut him off and looked him directly in the eye. I was probably glaring at him, actually, though it wasn't exactly on purpose.

"Ah, err, I mean… Mw-Mwa ha ha! To think you'd *dare* to order *me* around! I can see you've very little regard for your life, woma—"

"Move."

"R-Right. Sorry," he stammered, practically leaping out of my way.

I stepped past him, took hold of the door's handle, then paused. "Andou. Andou Jurai," I said, pulling a sheet of paper out of my bag and holding it out to him. "You can have this back."

That sheet of paper, of course, was his club application form. He glanced at the form as he accepted it, then looked back up at me with a mixture of confusion and panic written all over his face. His haughty, arrogant sneer had vanished, like it had never been there in the first place.

"H-Huh?"

"I have no intention of accepting a tactless lout who shows open contempt for his seniors into my club."

“Ah, wait, I—”

“Goodbye, and good day to you. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors,” I said, giving him my best retail worker smile and slamming the door in his face.

And that’s how the two of us met. The only reason I’d hesitate to call it an awful first impression is that “awful” almost felt like an understatement. It was the sort of first meeting that had made me sincerely pray that he would find happiness in some far-off foreign country and never, ever come back.

I’d eventually ended up speaking with him about that first encounter of ours, and his explanation was about what you’d expect:

“So, I figured that first impressions are everything, right? And I thought that I’d be screwed if I didn’t, like, *assert* myself right off the bat, so I decided my best option would be to go in guns blazing. I thought that if I showed off the sort of guy I really was, you’d be all ‘you’re the kind of talent that only arises once in a decade! Please, I *need* you in my club!’ or whatever.”

One almost had to be impressed by the sheer amount of energy the man could throw into the most hopelessly doomed of efforts. But I digress.

At the time, I’d had absolutely no intention of letting him join my club. However, one of the other new applicants, a girl named Kushikawa Hatoko, frantically poured everything she had into arguing on his behalf. That might not have been enough in and of itself, but then Andou showed up the next day, literally prostrated himself before me, and apologized profusely for his behavior. That, finally, convinced me to give him a second chance.

If I’m going to be completely honest, though…I wasn’t really *angry* with him in the first place. I also didn’t actually have the unilateral authority to deny his admission. Club presidents just didn’t have that sort of power in our school. I’d only been so stubborn because it had felt like I’d be undermining what authority I *did* have if I reversed my decision too easily, considering how plainly I’d shot him down.

In any case, a second chance would be his, and I decided to go about granting it to him in the form of a mock interview.

☆

“All riiight, everyone, it’s cleaning time! Hip, hip, hooraaay!” shouted Hatoko, leading us in a cheer.

“Hip, hip, hooraaay,” said the rest of us, more or less playing along.

“Come on, I can barely hear you! One more time—hip, hip, hooraaay!”

“Why’re you so worked up about this, anyway?” I sighed.

“Because we’re cleaning, Juu! *Cleaning*!”

Hatoko was at least twenty percent more hyper than usual, and all I could do was shake my head with exasperation. We had indeed all gotten together that day to give our trusty old club room a thorough cleaning. It had seen us through thick and thin, and the best way to repay it for its loyal

service was to get it spic and span! And whenever cleaning entered the picture, my childhood friend Kushikawa Hatoko simply could not be silenced.

Hatoko had always loved that sorta domestic-style stuff. Housework and cooking were right up her alley, and cleaning was crammed in with them among her favorite activities. Doubly so if she got to do a real major, from-the-ground-up sort of cleanup. She got really, *really* into those, and you could tell just by looking at her.

Hatoko was wearing an apron that she'd brought from home (*not* the apron that she wore while she was cooking, notably), along with a bandanna tied around her head and draped over her hair to keep it clean. She held her own personal feather duster in one hand, and her apron's pocket was stuffed with enough miscellaneous cleaning gear that you'd think said pocket was of the 4D variety.

"Mwa ha ha!" I cackled. "Such enthusiasm truly befits the woman who earned herself the title Sanitary Sniper!"

"You're literally the only person who calls her that," Tomoyo jabbed with a roll of her eyes.

"Okay, everyone, it's time! Leeet's clean!" Hatoko cried out. We all moved out on cue, taking up our respective cleaning stations.

My task: window wiping! I started out by tying a bandanna over my mouth. I wasn't sensitive to dust or anything, to be clear, and I wasn't hyped to clean in the same way Hatoko was at all. So why did I use the bandanna as a face mask? *Obviously* because I thought it'd look cool! Covering your mouth with some sort of mask has the same sort of vaguely villainous appeal that wearing an eyepatch does. Characters who cover their mouths with a scarf or a particularly tall collar are *instantly* rendered extra stylish *and* mysterious!

I checked my reflection in the window, and I gotta say, I was looking *good*. The fact that it was a plain, flat white bandanna was a bit of a shame, but eh, I was still pulling it off for sure. I wasn't done yet either—no, I reached out once more for yet another bandanna! This one I wrapped around the upper half of my head, tilting it on a slight offset to cover up just my left eye.

Ooooh, nice*! Now* that's *cool!* The vast majority of my head was concealed, with the sole exception of my right eye, and I looked *awesome*! *Looking like Kakashi:* hella *cool!*

As I stood there, admiring myself in the window's reflection, Hatoko walked up beside me.

"Ah, Juu, your bandanna's slipping!" she said as she tied it back properly in place around my head. I glowered at her. "Huh? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Why... Why... *Why* are you always like this...?"

"Huuuh? Why am I like what?"

"On second thought? Forget it. Thanks."

“Oh, okay. No problem!”

The way she beamed at me was just too intense, and I couldn’t bring myself to complain. She really *had* always been like that. If I let my pants droop down stylishly, she’d be all, “Oh, Juu, your pants are falling down!” and pull them up for me. If I left my school jacket unbuttoned, she’d say, “Oh, you forgot to button up!” and do them up in an instant. She’d even tuck in my undershirt if I left it hanging out… Someday, if she ever had kids, I just knew she’d be the sort of mother who’d patch up the jeans that her offspring had spent ages getting *just* the right degree of distressed.

“Right, guess I’d better get cleaning,” I muttered. “Gotta be a washcloth around here somewhere…”

“Ah, don’t use a washcloth for that, Juu!” called out Hatoko. “Newspaper’s better for window wiping!”

“Oh, huh, really? Okay, then,” I said, a little impressed by her command of cleaning trivia. I grabbed a wad of newspaper and started wiping away, taking care not to leave marks as I cleaned the windows’ every nook and cranny, sometimes standing on a desk to help me reach the parts that were a little too high up for me.

Meanwhile, Hatoko was right next to me, cleaning out the little gaps between the windows and their frames. “Ta-da!” she exclaimed, pulling out two of her secret weapons of ultimate cleaning potential from her apron’s pocket. “A Hatoko Stick and a worn-out toothbrush!”

The “Hatoko Stick” was just a pair of disposable chopsticks that she’d wrapped some gauze around the tips of, but between it and the toothbrush, she seemed to be getting every last little bit of dust out of those window frames, humming a happy little tune to herself all the while.

“Somebody’s sure enjoying this,” I commented. “Is cleaning *really* that much fun for you?”

“It sure is!” replied Hatoko. “It’s nice to know you’re living in a clean environment, and looking at the place you worked on and seeing it all nice and pretty feels great! Doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” I said with a noncommittal shrug.

I didn’t want to rain on her parade, but honestly, I wasn’t exactly a fan of the activity. I never bothered cleaning if I didn’t absolutely have to, and I was always on the lookout for shortcuts to make it less of a pain. And on that note, it was time for me to put a certain plan of mine into action!

“Chifuyumooon,” I groaned pathetically, throwing myself at Chifuyu’s mercy. She was in charge of wiping down the tables, by the way. “Pleeease whip something up that’ll get all this cleaning done for us! Like, make a tool that makes all the trash in the room disappear or whatever!”

World Create gave Chifuyu the power to make anything, and “anything” just *had* to include *something* that could make all this cleaning a breeze! Like, I dunno, a Dyson or a Roomba or something!

Chifuyu turned to face me. “Sheesh, Andou, you really are hopeless,” she said in a husky voice that told me she was surprisingly into the whole

Doraemon bit I'd been going for. Her imitation was almost *shockingly* bad, to be fair, but it was also really cute, which balanced things out.

Chifuyu rummaged around in an imaginary pocket in front of her, humming a little fanfare for herself as she prepared to produce the perfect tool to clean the room up in a snap!

"A black hooole!"

"*Noooooope*!" I shouted as loudly as I possibly could, desperately cutting her off and praying that my interjection would make her *not* use her power after all! "What are you *thinking*, Chifuyu?! Doing a Doraemon voice doesn't mean you can get away with creating the ultimate tool of cosmic destruction in the middle of our room!"

"You wanted something that'd make all the trash disappear," said Chifuyu.

"I wanted something that'd leave the *rest* of the room intact! A black hole would make *everything* disappear, us included! Actually, wait...can you even make one of those in the first place?"

"Hmm..." Chifuyu paused to think for a moment. "Probably."

Being a little casual about this, aren't you, Chifuyu? What's with the "I bet I could make one if I tried" attitude, girl?! Holy crap, the power to create anything's scary as hell! Once again, I was reminded of the terrifying scale of Chifuyu's power.

"Hey, Juu, look! Look at me!" called out a certain other member of our club who, for the record, had a power just as horrifyingly large-scale as Chifuyu's. Hatoko had finished cleaning out the window frames and was now wiping down the floorboards with a rag. "Look! I figured out how to use my power for this!"

I felt a chill run down my spine. *Over Element* gave Hatoko complete and utter control over the fundamental forces of nature. If she wanted to, she could burn down a forest or drown a town without batting an eyelash. Her power had the ultimate combination of high output and wide area of effect, and I could only describe its destructive potential as calamity-level. It was an exceedingly brutal, exceedingly dangerous, and utterly horrific power...

"Look, see? My washcloth *never* dries out this way!"

...and Hatoko's method of putting that utterly horrific power to use? Making an ever-wet washcloth. Water was, of course, one of *Over Element*'s eponymous elements, and by manipulating the ambient moisture in the air, she could keep her washcloth perfectly dampened at all times. Yes, it would remain Soft and Wet forevermore!

"I guess the nature of your power matters less than how you choose to use it, in the end," I half sighed, half muttered to myself. *Huh, is it me, or was that actually pretty deep?*

"Oh, wooow! I can keep wiping *forever* like this!" exclaimed Hatoko as she dashed across the floor on all fours, wiping away as she went. Since her washcloth was being constantly refreshed with new water, she never had to

stop to soak it and wring it out…though I had to imagine she'd have to stop and *clean* the thing eventually. It *had* to be filthy.

"Looks like you're having more fun than ever, huh?" I commented.

"Yeah! Having a super power really is amazing, Juu!"

I couldn't have agreed more, but I also wanted to scream that this was *not* the representative example of super powers' amazingness she should've been going for. *I think this is the most excited I've ever seen her look while she's using her power too... Sheesh.*

I heaved a sigh, then got back to my own task. It didn't take me long at all to finish wiping down the rest of the windows, and with nothing left to do, I decided I might as well help somebody else finish up their work. *Let's see, who's having the most trouble…? Ah, yup, Tomoyo for sure.*

"Hey, need a hand?" I asked, walking over to Tomoyo. She'd been tasked with organizing the bookshelves.

"That'd be great, thanks. This is pretty rough," Tomoyo grumbled in reply. A small ocean of books was spread out around her, and she sounded like she was pretty fed up with them.

"Ah, yeah," I replied, "sorting the shelves of the Used Bookstore of the Divine: *God Off* would be pretty hard for one person on their own."

"I don't care how many times you casually drop that stupid name into the conversation—it's never gonna be a thing," jabbed Tomoyo.

Ugh, I know, right? I'd been calling the row of massive bookshelves that took up one of our clubroom's walls "*God Off*" as a term of respect since literally right after I joined, and it *still* hadn't stuck.

Generations' worth of our predecessors had sloughed off—or rather, *donated* their books to the club, and over the years, it had grown into a dauntingly enormous collection. We had everything, from pure literature and niche subculture stuff to bus schedules and photo books! Every genre under the sun was represented somehow—a veritable treasure trove of books, indeed. Tomoyo's task, meanwhile, was to take that confusing, jumbled-up mess of a literary hoard and impose *some* sense of order upon it.

"I *swear* I always put stuff back where it came from after I'm done reading, so how'd it end up turning into this much of a mess?" griped Tomoyo.

"I mean, it's not like it was ever sorted to begin with," I replied. "The selection was nonsense from the get-go, and it's full of random single volumes of manga and magazines and stuff."

Tomoyo and I did our best to restore some semblance of order to the shelves together. We lined up series in the right order, sorted them as best we could by genre—or by size when that failed—and tried to rearrange them to look at least a little decent. Meanwhile, we took the chance to dust the shelves themselves off while they were nice and free of books. It was pretty hard work, but for a book lover like me, planning the shelves' layout ended up being a surprising amount of fun.

“Seriously though, this variety’s *ridiculous*,” I observed, grabbing a book off a pile. “Oh, hey, look—it’s one of those books that assesses your personality based on your blood type! Remember how everyone got all obsessed with blood type personality tests for a while, way back whenever? Feels like I saw a billion of those books back then.”

“What do you mean, ‘back then’?” asked Tomoyo. “That’s still a thing, and it’s still basically everywhere. God, it’s so *stupid*—your blood type? *Seriously*?”

“Oh, huh, you get annoyed by stuff like that?” I was a little surprised. I thought that girls were supposed to all love that sorta fortune-telling adjacent compatibility test stuff.

“It’s not that it annoys me on principle, exactly… It’s just that type-Bs always get the short end of the stick in that sort of book, so I ended up not liking them on the whole.”

“Oh, right. I forgot that you have type-B blood.” She had a point too. Blood type personality assessments *did* tend to give type-Bs a lot of crap about being selfish and egocentric and stuff. “But look on the bright side—having type-B blood means that you have the same blood type that gorillas do!”

“Why would I give a crap about that?!”

Okay, yeah, so it’s kind of pointless trivia, but for the record: literally all gorillas are type-B. Chimpanzees and orangutans, meanwhile, are all type-A.

Tomoyo puffed out her cheeks and pouted for a moment, then started grumbling again. “Like *you* even get to talk, mister got-the-good-blood-type. Everybody always has nothing but nice things to say about type-Os, you know?”

“Hmm… I mean, yeah, I guess you probably have a point,” I agreed noncommittally as I skimmed through the book. I’d just happened to open it up to a page about romantic affinities between blood types. “Oh, huh, you’re totally right! ‘Type-O men are calm and generous, and they can be excellent romantic partners for just about anyone,’ it says. I guess people really *do* hold type-Os in high regard! Man, I’m awesome!”

“What about Bs? What’s it say about type-B girls?” asked Tomoyo, a girl who had—let it not be forgotten—just been talking about how stupid blood-type stuff like this was less than a minute before. She leaned way in, peering at the book over my shoulder. Yeah, she was *definitely* interested.

“Umm, let’s see… ‘Type-B women are selfish and egocentric, and they’re a terrible match for type-A partners. Type-B and AB partners are only slightly better for them.’”

“Ugggh, I *knew* it,” moaned Tomoyo with a scowl when I finished reading.

“Hey, don’t let it get to you! They just make all this crap up, anyway. There’s no basis to it.”

“I’m *not* letting it get to me. Not even a little bit!”

“C’mon, you obviously are.”

“I am all *sorts* of not letting it get to me!” snapped Tomoyo.

Yeah, nah, she’s upset all right. I put on a slightly strained smile and kept reading. “‘The optimal partner for a type-B woman is a type-O man. Or, really, the only suitable partner for a type-B woman is a type-O man.’ Ha ha ha!”

The book’s claims were just so hysterically baseless, I couldn’t stop myself from cracking up. *Who wrote this book, and how did a type-B woman hurt them?* It really *was* pure stupidity, and I felt an impulse to banter with Tomoyo about it.

“Welp, bad news, Tomoyo! Looks like you’ll have to settle for dating me!”

“Huh?” For a second, Tomoyo’s face went totally deadpan. She stared at me, her mouth hung slightly agape.

“What?”

“H-Huh? Wh-What do you mean, dating you…?”

“Oh, like, I mean…y’know, since I’m a type-O guy, and all…?”

“I-I knew that! *Duh*!” Tomoyo shrieked, her face bright red. Then she snatched the book away from me. “W-We’re supposed to be cleaning, not reading this crap! If you’re gonna help, then help, and if you’re gonna distract me, then beat it!”

Before I even had time to apologize, Tomoyo had shoved me away from the bookshelves. It seemed I was banned from helping out on that end of things. *Guess I must’ve touched a nerve somehow.*

With nowhere else to go, I drifted over to the table where Sayumi was sorting through the documents that had piled up in our room over the course of time. There were a *lot* of them—a veritable mountain, even—and Sayumi was taking them all on alone. I tried calling out to her.

“Hey, Sayumi, anything I can… Uhh, Sayumi?”

I’d been convinced that she’d be blazing through the pile of paperwork at her usual lightning-quick pace, but instead, Sayumi was sitting completely still. She was holding a single sheet of paper, gazing at it with a look of intense nostalgia in her eyes.

“Oh…Andou,” Sayumi said, finally noticing me.

“What’s up? You were really spacing out there.”

“Pardon me. I just happened to come across something rather entertaining,” she explained, presenting the piece of paper to me. “Well? I imagine this must bring back some memories for you.”

She was right. It really did immediately cast my mind back into a fit of sentimental reminiscence.

A student’s mugshot was pasted to the upper right corner of the sheet, and the lines below had been written with exceeding care in ballpoint pen, careful to avoid even the slightest of spelling errors. I knew that because *I’d* spent almost an entire night writing it myself.

It was the resume that I’d written up in preparation for Sayumi’s club entrance exam.

Chapter 3: An Interview, or Rather, Nihility

I'd called the task I'd set forth for Andou an exam, but really, there wasn't anything particularly complicated about it. All that I'd asked was that he allow me to interview him.

"Thank you for having me!" Andou called out with admirable enthusiasm as he walked into the club room. He walked briskly over to the chair that I'd set up in the center of the room and took a seat.

"Well, then. Andou?"

"Yes?!"

"Don't let the door hit you on your way out."

"Right! Wait, *whaaat*?! B-But why?! I haven't even said anything yet!"

"Do you recall me saying 'Please, have a seat'? No, you don't, because I did not. Yet there you are, sitting down. If this were a job interview, you'd have already disqualified yourself from the position."

"You're seriously going *that* hardcore with this interview?!"

Hmm? How strange. When he puts it that way, I wasn't planning on putting him through the wringer quite this forcefully.

I'd found myself scolding him and picking on him before I even knew it, and part of me couldn't help but think that maybe he might be worth keeping around after all...for the sole purpose of messing with him. Something about his face and the way he carried himself piqued my inner sadist.

"For your sake," I continued, "I'll overlook this little sitting-down indiscretion. Do try and be more careful from now on though."

"Right," Andou sighed.

"Now then, I believe it's time for us to begin. Although, before we do..." My gaze dropped to Andou's feet, and I couldn't help but ask. "You are aware that only one of your pant legs is rolled up, yes? Why?"

The question had been eating away at me from the moment he'd stepped into the room. His right pant leg, and the right leg alone, had been half-heartedly rolled up a short way. It was a truly inexplicable fashion statement.

"Huh...? That's just, I mean... I was just walking around like normal, and it did that on its own, I guess... F-For the record, I didn't do it on purpose or anything!"

"It looks ridiculous. Please fix it at once."

"B-But, that would... I mean, my asymmetry..."

"It's sloppy and unseemly. Fix it."

Andou paused, biting his lip, then sighed again. "Right," he said, quickly rolling down his pant leg.

I'd rather not consider the possibility, but did he perhaps think that wearing it like that looks cool? If so, then I have serious concerns for this boy's future. No, actually, that's not quite right. I have serious concerns for his present.

"And with that, let us begin. First...yes, that should do nicely," I mumbled to myself as I perused his resume...or rather, as I pretended to do so. "I would like you to put on a skit for me. Make it a high-effort one."

"Bwahuh?!" bellowed Andou in shock.

Yes, the boy really does have the best way of reacting to these things, doesn't he? How very thrilling.

"H-H-Hold up a second, Takanashi! Where the heck is *this* coming from?! Isn't this the part where you, like, ask me why I want to join the club or something?! I memorized a *sixteen page* answer to that question!"

"I have no intention of conducting such a by-the-book interview. I value adaptability above all else in my club members."

"Since when were *literary clubs* so hardcore about that sorta stuff...?" Andou moaned, clutching at his head. Finally, though, he seemed to resolve himself and looked up once more. "All right! One skit, coming up!"

"Oh? You'll take on the challenge?" That put me at something of a loss. Frankly, I had only asked the question to put him on the spot. I hadn't considered the possibility that he would actually try to go through with it. If anything, *I'd* ended up more on the spot than he was.

"I, Andou Jurai, will now perform the transformation poses of every Heisei-era Kamen Rider!"

"...I apologize, Andou. Asking you to do this was a mistake. Please, just stop."

I finally caved. I'd never expected that *I* would be the one to admit defeat in the end, but I simply couldn't take it. He just *wouldn't stop*.

"Huh? Already? I'm only on the seventh *Ryuki* Rider, though!"

I was far from knowledgeable about the subject, but I'd somehow assimilated the trivia that there were over ten Heisei era *Kamen Rider* series, and it had taken him *this long* to go through the signature poses from *three* of them, and not even completely. And, to make matters worse, he was *astonishingly* good at them.

I'd never seen the real thing, of course, so I had no basis to judge the quality of his imitations, but I *could* tell that the deftness and cleanness of his movements were clearly abnormal. Just how much time had he squandered practicing transformation poses to polish them up to that standard?

"For the sake of reference, how many 'Riders' are there in '*Ryuki*'...?" I asked apprehensively.

"Thirteen."

I was floored. We'd still been a long, *long* way from being finished. Admitting defeat, it seemed, had been the right decision. The *Kamen Rider*

franchise had obviously grown by leaps and bounds while I wasn't paying attention. *I'll have to rent one of them sometime soon.*

"Well," Andou continued, "there *are* thirteen Riders, but since Odin doesn't have a human form, he doesn't actually have a transformation pose. Oh, but there *is* this rider called Alternative, I guess…though technically, fans argue all the time about whether or not Alternative actually counts as a rider at all—"

"That's quite enough of that. Thank you very much. You may stop now."

"Aw, man, seriously…? I was gonna go into my Rider Kick medley after I was done with these too…"

"Why, exactly, are you so enthusiastic about this?"

"Well, y'know, I *was* pretty embarrassed at first, but once I got started, it actually ended up being pretty fun!" admitted Andou in a rather frivolous tone.

Does he truly have no sense of shame whatsoever? "Well then, on to the next question," I said, already a little tired. I glanced down at his resume once more…

"Pffft!"

…and simply could not stop myself from bursting out in laughter. It was, I must admit, rather uncouth of me.

☆

"Oh man, this *does* take me back," I muttered as I looked over the resume Sayumi had found while cleaning. The other members of our club quickly gathered around us.

"Oh, right, how'd that go down again?" asked Tomoyo. "Didn't Andou end up being the only one of us who had to go through an interview after he made Sayumi flip out on him?"

"I'd prefer if you'd refrain from characterizing my actions as 'flipping out,' Tomoyo," said Sayumi with a bitter smile. "I was simply mortified to realize that the two of us were part of the same species."

"That's kinda *way friggin' worse* than flipping out at me, actually?!" I interjected.

"My first thought was the sincere hope that he would cease to be human."

"Isn't that kinda worse than, I dunno, just telling me to go die?! Are you telling me to go find a stone mask to put on or something?!"

"But, yes, this *does* rather take me back as well. I'd completely forgotten that I filed this away along with my more important documents," Sayumi continued in a thoughtful, almost meditative tone. She placed the resume on the table. "Andou? Would you object to me showing this to everyone?"

The stuff on there *was* private information, technically, so I guess she felt obligated to ask for permission. I was totally cool with the idea, though, so I gave her a nod and a "Sure, knock yourself out," without protest.

“I really did end up in a fix back then,” said Sayumi. “The moment I actually *read* his resume, it was just so terribly, *dreadfully* funny, so positively *hysterical*, I completely lost control of myself.”

“Oh, right, I remember that,” I said. “You ended up clutching your sides, stepping out of the room, and never coming back.” She’d done it halfway through the interview too, which meant that despite the verbal thrashing she’d given me, I’d passed the interview by default, for all intents and purposes.

Hmm. That’s weird, though—I took that resume super seriously! Why would it make her laugh? I don’t really get Sayumi’s sense of humor.

Everyone leaned in to read my resume.

• What is one of your hobbies / skills?
People watching.

“Oh my *god*, of *course* you’d be one of those people,” Tomoyo groaned as she cringed away from me. The others were all reacting similarly as well.

Huh? Th-That’s weird! When I say “My hobby’s people watching,” people are supposed to be all, like, “This man…he sees the world from a perspective fundamentally different from the average nobody’s!” and stuff!

“Wh-What’s wrong with you, guys?! People watching’s a fine hobby! What’s so bad about people watching?!”

“Please calm down, Andou,” said Sayumi. “You’re right—people watching is nothing to be ashamed of in and of itself. I would go so far as to call it a given that most people engage in the activity on occasion. It’s said that watching others allows one to gain insight into one’s own personality, and I believe that there’s much we can learn by paying close attention to the rest of mankind on the whole.”

“Right?! So—”

“*However*, it *is* profoundly embarrassing to assume those facts make people watching a hobby you can be proud about—dare I say arrogant about—pursuing, and proceeding to show that hobby off to the people around you is just about as pathetic as one could get.”

That sure shut me up nicely. Sayumi had won our debate in such a crushing masterstroke; I was left literally speechless and simply sat back as she carried on.

“I could have endured ‘people watching’ easily enough on its own, to be clear, but the moment I read the next line, I very nearly gave myself a hernia trying to hold back my laughter,” Sayumi said, pointing at the next entry on the sheet.

• What’s an area you excel in relative to your peers?
My disinterest in other people.

“That literally *directly* contradicts your hobby!” snapped Tomoyo.

Oh. Huh. I guess it does. I sure contradicted myself two lines in, didn't I?

"You people watch as a hobby, but you're not interested in people? Make up your mind, for crying out loud!" Tomoyo ranted.

"It's not that I'm not—I mean, like... *You* know how these things work! It's that, like, contradictions are a core part of what makes up my inner essence, or something..."

"And then I read the next line, which all but reached into my gut and rubbed salt into my newly herniated abdominal muscles."

• What's an area you fall short in relative to your peers?

My lack of emotions.

"*Pfff* ha ha ha ha *haaa*!" Tomoyo doubled over in uncontrollable laughter. "Aha ha ha, holy crap, hoooly crap, my *sides*! Ha ha ha, *you*, *emotionless*?! How are you *anything* even *close* to emotionless?! You're the most wildly emotional guy I've ever known! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Before long, Sayumi was chuckling along with her. "He he! He he he, really, he absolutely is... Among all the individuals I've ever met, Andou is most certainly one of the most emotionally expressive people I've ever known—perhaps even *the* most! He he he he!"

Tomoyo was laughing so hard she couldn't even talk anymore, and she was smacking the table with glee. Sayumi, on the other hand, must not have wanted to crack up quite that exuberantly—to be fair, it *would* have been pretty out of character for her—and had both of her hands pressed to her cheeks, trying desperately to hold it in. She ended up making a pretty ridiculous face as a result, by the way. Meanwhile, *I*, the source of their mirth, was profoundly, intensely humiliated.

"What're *you* laughing at?!" I bellowed.

"Simmer down, Usui!" gasped Tomoyo. "Aha ha ha! No, okay, seriously, I just can't! I can't take it! I can't stop laughing!"

"C-Come on, what's your problem, you two?! I answered all those questions super seriously, so don't you think *laughing* at them's, I dunno, a bit rude?! I may be a calm and generous type-O, but that doesn't mean I can't get angry sometimes!"

"Oh, he can get angry, he says! Look at that—*emotions*! He's just *full* of 'em, I swear! Aha ha ha ha ha!" cackled Tomoyo.

Gaaah, this sucks! This wasn't how it was supposed to turn out at all! Everyone was supposed to read that line and be all "What drives this mysterious man, and why does he feel so profoundly dangerous? What maddening darkness must lurk within his heart? What happened to him to make him so twisted?!" and stuff! They were supposed to look upon me with gazes brimming with fear and respect!

I was so abjectly humiliated that I ended up completely speechless. A moment later, though, Chifuyu tugged at my jacket.

"You don't have emotions, Andou?" she asked.

“Oh, Chifuyu… Yeah, that’s right. I don’t. I was born without so much as a trace of human emotion within my heart!” I said, channeling the boundless void of absolute nihility that lurked within my emotionless mind.

Chifuyu cocked her head. “Hey, Andou?” she said, then paused before continuing. “Do you like me?”

“Huh…? I mean, yeah, of course I do! You’re one of my most important friends, Chifuyu.”

“Then you have emotions.”

“Gah! N-No, not like that! I’m *totally* emotionless, for real! I don’t like you, or anyone, or anything at all! I’m *totally* uninterested in other people!”

“Oh…”

“Ahh, no, I’m sorry! Don’t get sad! I was lying! I totally love you to pieces, Chifuyu!”

“Then you have emotions.”

“Ugh…”

“You’re a liar, Andou.”

“Ugggh!”

Chifuyu sighed. “You’re always so ridiculous, Andou,” she said with an exasperated shake of her head.

“D-Damnatiooons! *Damnations*, I say!” I was so absolutely mortified that I fled the scene on the spot. I also didn’t bother to look where I was going, so I ran into somebody after barely three steps’ worth of my all-out sprint.

“Whoa! Be careful, Juu! It’s dangerous to run off without warning like that!” said my ever-reliable childhood friend Hatoko with a smile as she caught me in her arms. “What’s wrong? Your face is all beet red!”

“D-Don’t call me beet red!” I snapped, but I was unable to prevent the truth from spilling forth from my lips a moment later. “Hear me out, Hatoko… Everyone’s making fun of me… Nobody understands me! Nobody appreciates the void of absolute nihility that lurks within me… Nobody can fathom how my derelict heart, insatiable in its—”

“Your ‘Darrell-licked heart’?” repeated Hatoko, cocking her head.

“No! Not Darrell-licked, *derelict*!” That being, of course, a majorly awesome adjective that means abandoned, empty, and left to decay! Also a word that has nothing to do with any Darrells licking anything, though I’ll admit it *does* sound a little like that.

“Anyway, though, there’s no *way* you don’t have emotions, Juu! It’s really easy to tell how you’re feeling all the time! Why, back in elementary school, our teacher even wrote about how expressive you were on your report card!”

“W-Wait, they did?!”

“It’s okay, Juu!” said Hatoko with another of her profoundly kind and gentle smiles. “You don’t have a void inside you at all! You have all the emotions you could ever need!”

“No, umm…Hatoko? You kinda have it backward. I know I was, like, being all dramatic about the emotionless thing, but that didn’t mean I wanted you to *deny* it! I actually sorta wanted you to agree with me?”

Hatoko, of course, wasn’t able to read into my complex and multifaceted motivations at all and just kept trying to soothe me. She was genuinely concerned for me by the looks of it, but she kept that smile of hers shining away all the while.

“I’ve known you forever, Juu, so you can take my word for it! You’ve *always* been a kindhearted and compassionate boy!”

Yes—her smile was truly akin to that of the Virgin Mary herself. Kind enough to wipe away every trace of my shame; warm enough to defrost the frigid lump within my chest.

I see.

So this is it.

This thing in the palm of my hand…

…is heart.

“Could you *get* any more pretentious?!” jabbed Tomoyo, who’d finally managed to suppress her own laughing fit, but I didn’t let her get to me this time! I was *far* too busy quivering in rapturous joy at the fact that I’d finally, *finally* come to understand the meaning…of *emotion*.

“Mwa ha ha… Mwaaa ha ha ha ha ha! I, Guiltia Sin Jurai, am *back*! Once, I reigned supreme over the brutal wastes of the underworld, working my heinous will over its barbaric denizens! I lived a life of bloodshed, hands stained sanguine by the lifeblood of a thousand *thousands* of corpses…but the doubts, how they gnawed at me! Cognizant of my sin, I dwelled within a fetid prison built of my own remorse, my own regret, till finally, my heart and emotions alike rotted away into nothingness—but then, I was reborn! I walked this world as Andou Jurai, and as I did, I touched the hearts of those around me…and now, now that I have learned of the human heart, I am *indomitable*!”

“Abridge your goddamn backstory! And make it less stupidly heavy! How the *hell* did you think all that up in a split second, anyway?!” shouted Tomoyo.

“Thank you, Hatoko!” I carried on, ignoring her protest. “You’ve done it —you’ve given me the missing piece I needed to revitalize my human heart!”

“Really? Hee hee hee, that’s great!”

“I don’t think *anything* could take me down now, no matter how mighty the foe! Wait—hmm… Could it be? This presence I’m sensing…is it one of *them*? And an Elder, at that? Mwa ha ha… How very amusing! *They* have no idea of the power I’ve obtained. *They* have no idea that I can use…*that* skill! The skill *that* human taught me in an age long past—a skill that *only* humans can use! Mwaaaa ha ha ha ha ha!”

I was firing on *all* cylinders, letting my own manic energy sweep me away and carry me right out of the room! I flew down the corridor without sparing a single glance back, making my way to the battlefield that awaited me!

Then, about ten minutes later…

…nobody came chasing after me, so I slunk back to the clubroom on my own to find that they’d all gone back to their cleaning like nothing had ever happened.

Sniff.

Chapter 4: A Hero, but at Times, a Demon Lord

Truly regrettable though it was, the interview that was to serve as Andou's club admission test had ended prematurely after I'd failed to hold back a fit of laughter and fled the room. It was an outright mistake on my part, plain and simple, and after a lapse like that, I no longer had any grounds to deny his entry into the club. I had lost by default, essentially.

Part of me had to wonder—was that his goal from the very beginning? Had he intentionally written his resume to be so gut-bustingly hilarious that I'd cackle my way out of the equation, like it or not? As I spent more and more time with him in our club, however, those suspicions rapidly faded. Soon, there was no doubt in my mind that Andou had written his resume completely earnestly.

In short: I came to understand that Andou Jurai had the worst case of chuunibyou I'd ever been exposed to.

"Y'know, you're really awesome, Sayumi!" Andou exclaimed out of the blue one day. This was some time after I'd given in and allowed him to join, and also after Miss Satomi had introduced Chifuyu to us. Our whole club of five had finally been assembled, though on that particular day, the other three had been held up by their own various circumstances, leaving me and Andou in the club room with only each other for company.

"What do you mean by that?" I replied, a little skeptically.

"Y'know, the way you're using that calculator!" he said, pointing at the device on the table before me. I was in the middle of working through the club's budget. We'd never even appointed a vice president, let alone a club treasurer, so that sort of miscellaneous accounting fell upon the president's head—that being mine. "I can't believe you can use the calculator with your left hand and write with your right hand at the same time!" Andou continued.

"Anyone can learn to do that with enough practice," I replied. "It's a necessary skill for people who work in bookkeeping or accounting."

"Right, and I'm saying that it's really awesome that you've already mastered a skill that bookkeepers and accountants need!"

"I'm left-handed to begin with, so this is hardly anything new to me," I said with a shrug. "I can do it the other way around easily enough as well. Watch," I added, swapping the calculator and notepad with each other as I continued with my task.

"Ooh, *dang*! That's so cool!" Andou exclaimed in admiration. I'd felt a little proud of the skill at first, but the more he praised me, the more I started feeling slightly bashful instead. "Wait, though—if you were born a southpaw, then does that mean you had to force yourself to learn to use your right hand?"

“I did, yes. Being left-handed has its fair share of inconveniences, after all.”

“Hmm…isn’t society supposed to be getting more accommodating for left-handed people these days?” asked Andou. “Like, they sell scissors for lefties all over the place now, and being left-handed’s supposed to give you an advantage in sports!”

“Perhaps,” I conceded, “but my grandmother was a very strict woman. She made sure that I learned to use my right hand when I was very young. I’m grateful she did, of course, looking back on it.”

Society may have been moving toward accommodating left-handed people, but the way I saw it, there had to be a limit to how far that could go. I could list examples for days, but the first one that sprang to mind was the Japanese writing system. Most Japanese characters were meant to be written with one’s right hand.

“You said that being left-handed gives you an advantage in sports, but in my view, that’s a very case-by-case matter,” I continued. “Take baseball, for instance—being left-handed may be considered a merit for a pitcher or when batting, but one could also consider it an even larger *demerit* in the sense that it restricts the number of positions you can play.”

“It does what, now? Huh? You mean, like, left-handed people can’t play some baseball positions?”

“Left-handed players are considered unsuitable for any infield position other than first base, on account of the fact that they can’t throw to first as quickly as a right-handed person. Conventionally speaking, they’re also considered unfit to play as catchers.”

That, of course, was all a matter of being *fit* or *suitable* to play a position. There was nothing that made it *impossible* for a left-handed person to fill any of those roles. Nevertheless, if you look at any league above a high school level, you’ll find very few left-handed players are ever assigned to play second or third base, shortstop, or catcher.

“Hmm,” mumbled Andou. It didn’t seem like he’d been totally satisfied by my explanation. “That’s weird, though. *Power Pros* lets you make lefties into shortstops or catchers or whatever no problem.”

“That might have been relevant to the conversation if we were discussing that game, which we aren’t.”

“*Mr. Fullswing* had Tomaru play second base too.”

“And *that* might have been relevant to the conversation if we were discussing that manga, which we aren’t.”

“Okay, but the way you’re describing your whole deal makes you sound less like you’re a southpaw and more like you’re ambidextrous! That’s even *more* amazing!”

“It’s not as impressive as you’re making it out to be. My ambidexterity is far from flawless. Thanks to my grandmother’s intervention, I’m *more* proficient at writing and eating with chopsticks using my right hand, but when playing most sports, using my left hand is much easier. I would say

that what I have is closer to cross-dominance than ambidexterity," I casually added.

"*C-Cross-dominance*?!" Andou exclaimed, suddenly leaning across the table toward me. His eyes were wide and practically aglow with excitement. The reaction was so outside my expectations, I was taken aback.

"Y-Yes," I replied, "that's what I said. Is there a problem?"

"Cross-dominance," Andou muttered to himself. "Cross-dominance... Wh-What the heck?! That word's *so friggin' cool*! Is that a perfect special move name, or *what*?!"

I didn't know what to say to that. Apparently, the term was "cool" in a way that somehow resonated with him. *This boy is a never-ending mystery.*

"Cross-dominance refers to a condition where a person's dominant hand varies from task to task," I explained. "It's also sometimes called mixed-handedness."

Andou, however, had long since departed on a journey to his own little world. He was staring at me with a look of undisguised envy in his eyes. "That's *awesome*... You're *hella* cool, Sayumi! I wish I could be cross-dominant too..."

"Do you? From my perspective, mixed-handedness is nothing more than a sign that you failed at an attempt to become truly ambidextrous. There's nothing exciting about using one hand for some things and the other hand for others."

"Nope, nuh-uh, cross-dominance is a *billion* times cooler! Being ambidextrous or being a switch hitter has *nothing* on it!"

"You mean...in terms of the word itself?" I asked, but Andou wasn't listening again.

"Man, I'm so jealous... I wish *I* could just be going about my day like usual, then casually swap dominant hands and be all 'Oh, this? Yeah, I'm cross-dominant'!"

Once again, I was speechless. It was the strangest thing—I had just casually used my left hand for a task and explained that it was thanks to my cross-dominance, and suddenly, I felt embarrassed beyond all conceivable measure for having done so. I hadn't been trying to brag or show off at all, but that did nothing to assuage the shame.

Then again, I must admit that it didn't feel terrible to be the subject of someone's envy...more or less. I also must admit that his reactions were, frankly, *incredibly* entertaining.

"I'd like to change the subject for a moment, Andou," I said.

"Huh? What to?"

"In Japanese, we have a particular word for especially tall high-rise buildings. I imagine you might not be aware, however, that the Japanese word originated as a translation of an English term. Can you guess what that English term is?"

Andou shrugged. "No clue."

"The answer is 'skyscraper.'"

“Sk-Skyscraper?!”

“And do you know what that English word means?” I proceeded to translate the word’s literal meaning into Japanese, and once again, Andou’s eyes lit up with excitement—exactly like I had hoped they would. Actually, his reaction was even *more* exaggerated this time than I’d anticipated. He was practically trembling with joy.

“How...?” he mumbled. “How could any language have a word for high-rises that’s *that* friggin’ cool...? I always *thought* that there could be a cooler word for those things—like calling them ‘heavenly pillars’ instead, or something—but I never *really* paid much mind to it...”

The Japanese word for skyscraper *was*, as I’d noted earlier, a more or less direct but condensed translation. Somehow, though, when I said “skyscraper” in English, it seemed to tickle Andou’s fancy like nothing else.

“Skyscraper...” he murmured rapturously. “*Dang*, that’s cool. It’s already perfect. Couldn’t possibly be improved on. You could use it as the name for a final boss’s ultimate attack, and I wouldn’t even *blink*! To think a word like that was out there in the natural world, just waiting to be discovered...”

It was frankly hysterical how quickly his mood swung from joy at having learned the word to regret at having not come across it sooner. I simply couldn’t help but smile as I watched him go about his antics.

He’s just so, well...so cute, somehow.

I had to imagine that if I’d had a younger brother, my relationship with him might have been something like my relationship with Andou. Meanwhile, as I was pondering that scenario, Andou had pulled out a black notebook from his schoolbag and started intently scribbling away in it. I recognized it—it was, as Tomoyo had so aptly put it, his cringe compilation.

Personally, I didn’t exactly judge him for his writing itself. Just about everyone had *something* similar, I imagined. I wouldn’t go so far as to call mine *cringey* per se, but I certainly had a notebook or two that I had no intention of ever showing anyone else.

Therein lay the difference, really. I couldn’t possibly bring myself to understand why he would go so far out of his way to show his off at every opportunity. My best guess was that he thought that scribbling away in a mysterious, ominous notebook made him look cool, and he was trying to sell everyone else on that misconception. If Andou ever came into possession of a Death Note, I could say with absolute certainty that he’d be apprehended by the police before the day was over.

“Oh, right! Hey, Sayumi?” said Andou, pausing to look up from his notebook. “How’s ‘Bible’ spelled in English again?”

“As in, *the* Bible? The Christian holy book?”

“Yeah, that,” Andou confirmed.

I didn’t know why he wanted to know how to spell “Bible”...but then again, I also hardly needed to ask. I could think of a plethora of ways he might’ve intended to use that knowledge. The most likely by far was that he

planned to use it to decorate the front cover of his notebook, where he'd already written "Crimson Scripture" in Japanese.

Needless to say, I *did* know how to spell "Bible" properly. For a moment, I considered teaching him the correct spelling as well...but then, an irresistibly intense urge to play a prank on him came over me.

"Uh, Sayumi? Do you not know either, or something?" asked Andou.

"Oh, no, of course I do!" I replied, focusing every ounce of my willpower into resisting the urge to crack up. "Bible is spelled V-I-V-R-E." I wrote the word out on a nearby piece of paper to demonstrate, and Andou's face lit up with glee.

"Ooh, gotcha! Thanks a million!"

"Oh, think nothing of it. Helping you on occasion is just part of my role as the club president."

"Seriously, though, I can't believe how much stuff you know! I'm really lucky to have an upperclassman like you around to give me advice."

One might think that his purehearted praise and genuine gratitude would make me feel ever so slightly guilty about my mischief—and one would be wrong. To the contrary, I was seconds away from bursting out in uproarious laughter. He was just *too funny*!

"H-Huh? Er, Sayumi? You're kinda trembling," pointed out Andou.

"O-Oh, it's nothing! Don't worry...about it," I barely managed to choke out in reply, pinching my thigh with all my might in an effort to help me keep a straight face. Endure, Takanashi Sayumi! You mustn't laugh, not yet! This will be infinitely funnier if you let the misapprehension stand as long as possible before revealing the truth!

I'm willing to admit that having subjected my adorable little underclassman to that sort of benign harassment may very well have made me a terrible person, but I simply couldn't help myself. Teasing him made him immeasurably cuter and a hundred times more entertaining! I was beside myself with excitement imagining the day that Andou would finally realize the word was misspelled.

He he he.

He he he he he he.

☆

One day in July, I found myself standing in the clubroom, a laptop set up on the table in front of me, with Sayumi and the rest of the girls looking on from my sides. Displayed on said laptop: the opening screen of what looked like a classic JRPG.

"I *thought* you guys had been keeping something secret from me lately," I said to my clubmates as a piece of rather stately title music kicked in, "but I definitely never would've guessed that you were making a game, of all things!"

I'd arrived at the club room expecting just another day of ordinary activities, but instead, I'd found the other members gathered together and

waiting for me. Their pride in what they'd created was obvious the moment I'd stepped into the room.

"He he he!" tittered Sayumi. "I'm pleased to learn that our surprise was a success."

"Yeah, about that. *Why* the surprise?" I asked. "Aren't I part of the club too?! Why'd you leave me out of something this fun?!"

"Simple," replied Sayumi. "We wanted you to serve as our playtester, and we wanted you to go into the experience completely free of biases and preconceptions. If we'd let you participate in the game's development, you wouldn't have been able to enjoy it from the pure and fresh perspective we're hoping for."

"Ahh, okay, that makes sense."

"We thought it would be fun to take your opinions and advice into consideration, polish the game, then submit it as a display piece for this year's cultural festival."

In other words, this was another of those technically-a-literary-club-activity sort of exercises. Stories were becoming a more and more vital component of modern video games as the industry evolved, and that was particularly true of the RPG genre. Considering that, you could make an argument that developing a game just *barely* fell within the literary club's purview.

"You sure you want *me* testing your game, though?" I asked with a sly grin. "I should warn you, I can be pretty picky about this sort of thing! Speaking as a gamer, I've got really high standards!"

"I know this is nothing new, but Andou has the weirdest way of making totally benign crap sound *really* obnoxious, doesn't he?" muttered Tomoyo with a grimace.

"Juu said the same thing when I told him that he should try a phone game I was playing a while back!" said Hatoko, her smile ever so slightly strained. "In the end, he got even more obsessed with it than I did."

"In any case," said Sayumi, "we'd like you to play the game first. We can go over any questions you have afterward."

I took a seat in front of the laptop and got ready to give the game a try.

"Man, though, I'm still impressed... It can't be *that* easy to make a whole game, can it?" I asked.

"Game-making programs have become much more common as of late," explained Sayumi. "There are plenty of freeware assets available for things like background art and music as well, so it's perfectly possible to make a passable game without learning any majorly specialized skills beforehand."

Sayumi pressed the enter key, and the game's title flashed onto the screen.

Puzzle & Tales of Dragon Fantasy

“You’re, uhh, laying it on pretty thick right from the get-go, huh?” I commented. “It’s almost refreshing how over the top it is, I guess? Like, it feels like I’m getting a whole sampler platter of famous JRPGs.”

“We decided not to get hung up on the title and to put that effort into the game proper instead. Try not to read into it,” said Sayumi.

After the title screen, the game presented me with a “Please enter your name” screen. *Yup, that’s some classic RPG stuff, all right.* The name field had a length limit as well—I was only allowed to use up to six letters, which struck me as sorta short.

“Damnations! I was gonna go with my true name, Guiltia, but it’s just one letter too long!”

“Yes, that’s the inten— That’s quite a shame, isn’t it?” said Sayumi, though she certainly didn’t *look* upset about it.

At that point, Tomoyo jumped in to ask a question. “Hey, Andou, are you the sort of person who comes up with your own name for your character in games like these?”

“You have to ask? Of course I am!”

“Hmm. I don’t, personally. I always end up going with the characters’ official names. How about you, Hatoko?”

“I usually just name the main character after myself, I guess! But I’ve only ever played games like this when Juu loans them to me. Chifuyu?”

“I do whatever.”

Guess it really comes down to a matter of personal preference, huh? I spent a moment carefully mulling over names that would fit within the character limit. Hmm... Looks like I’ve just got the full run of the alphabet to work with... All right, then...

XANADU

“Mwa ha ha!” I cackled, unable to restrain my glee. “*Perfection*!”

Xanadu, of course, is a word meaning “an earthly paradise” that traces its roots back to the Chinese city of Shangdu! Words that start with the letter x: hella, *hella* cool! What could be cooler than Xanadu, seriously?!

Are you sure you want to name yourself XANADU?

I selected “Yes” without hesitating for so much as a second. *Xanadu’s great adventure begins here and now...*or so I’d thought, anyway.

Are you really sure you want to name yourself XANADU?

For some reason, a second confirmation screen popped up instead. *Huh. This game’s system is kind of on the cautious side about this stuff, isn’t it?* I selected “Yes” once more.

Are you really, REALLY sure you want to name yourself XANADU? Are you sure you won't regret it?

Okay, I'm getting sorta sick of this now! I selected "Yes" yet again.

...What? Like, seriously? For real? You ACTUALLY want to go with XANADU? You didn't just name yourself that as a joke? Are you, like, sane?

"Is it just me, or did the narration's speech style just totally change?!" I was more than a little bewildered, but I selected "Yes" a fourth time.

omg lmao, like, LOL, srsly?
oh god, you actually think that's cool LMAO
XANADU omfg
so lame looooooool
you're definitely the sort of person who'll give his kid some stupid nonsense name if you ever have one lmfao

"H-Hey, Sayumi?! Your narration's *really* trying to pick a fight with me over here! And the chat speak's making it way, way worse!"

"That's a feature, yes."

"Huh...? It's a what? And wait, does this game seriously understand the name that I input? Would this all change if I put in something different? Wouldn't that take, like, some seriously high-level programming?"

"Not quite," said Sayumi with a shake of her head. "The narration would've said the same thing no matter what name you picked."

"But wait, then—"

"I anticipated the sort of name you would choose and wrote the narrator's reaction accordingly. You are, on the whole, *extremely* predictable."

"Ugh!" A curse upon you, Sayumi! Why must you be so insufferably clever?!

Anyway, I wasn't really feeling Xanadu as a name anymore, so I backed up to the input screen and started considering my options again. Eventually, I settled on a new name: Loki! As in, the name of the god of cunning and mischief, who also happened to be blood brothers with Odin, king of the gods! I've heard that Loki's name is supposed to mean something like "Bringer of the End" too! *Loki: hella cool!*

Loki (lol)
You really don't learn, do you?
Did you really think naming yourself after a god would be cool? Major cringe moment.

“Okay, is it just me, or are its insults *weirdly* specific?! How’d this stupid game know I put a god’s name in?!”

“I predicted that you’d probably turn to mythological figures for your second attempt, and assuming you’d use a god’s name was an easy extrapolation from there,” said Sayumi, who could apparently read me like a book.

“Aggh, dammit!” I snarled, backing up to the input screen once more. My next idea was to use the Ainu word for god, “kamui”—but I stopped at the last second. Sayumi had been spot-on when it came to predicting my choices so far, so if I wanted to get the better of her, I’d have to do something totally unpredictable!

```
AAAAAA
So you’ve decided to smash keys at random next, have you?
I’m afraid you still have a lot to learn if you want to stand any chance of outwitting me.
```

“How the heck did you see *that* coming?!”

Sayumi chuckled. “You really *are* predictable, Andou.”

I hung my head in despair. *I can’t take this anymore! Thinking for even a* second *that I could beat Sayumi in the field of psychological warfare was a terrible mistake!* My only remaining option was to give in and use a perfectly ordinary name. I just wanted to be over with this nonsense and start the actual game, already.

```
Tarou
Oh? Quite the ordinary name you’ve chosen this time.
Are you backing out after all that?
You spent so long trying to make yourself look cool, and NOW you’re getting cold feet?
I suppose you weren’t all THAT dedicated to your aesthetic after all, were you?
I’m almost disappointed.
```

“Gaaah, I don’t even *care* anymore!” There was just no escaping Sayumi’s insight into my thought patterns. *What is she, the ultimate demon lord? Can I not run from this boss fight?* “Damnations... Now I know how Yugi-boy felt when Pegasus screwed with him through his VCR...”

“He he he! What a shame, Andou. Don’t worry though. It’s all over now, and you can move on with the game,” said Sayumi as she messed with the controls for a moment and then urged me to try once more.

I was completely over coming up with a cool name, so I just put in “JURAI” this time. The game didn’t nitpick that decision, for once, and I was finally on my way into the actual story.

One night, JURAI had a terrible nightmare.

He dreamed that the Demon Lord, who was slain a thousand years ago, came back to life and threatened to devastate the world once more.

“Can you hear me, JURAI?”

“An incredible power sleeps within you.”

“Please, use that power well! The world...is in...your...”

JURAI woke up to find himself in his own bed.

He looked at the back of his hand and found a crest inscribed upon it: a six-pointed star.

Ooh, now this is getting interesting! We’re off to a compelling start! Classic plot developments all around!

The black screen transitioned into a proper scene illustrated in a pixel-art style. It looked more like an RPG from several console generations ago than anything modern, sure, but that gave it a sort of retro charm that I was pretty into. I was finally in control of my character, so I spent a minute walking around in his room and messing with the menu system.

“No items and no equipment, huh...? Eh, guess that’s normal when you’re just starting out.”

I steered JURAI out of his room and down a staircase where I found another character in the kitchen. I figured that was probably supposed to be my character’s mom.

MOM: “Good morning, JURAI! There’s a big commotion in the plaza today. I wonder what’s happening?”

MOM: “Come to think of it, I heard that the king’s knights were coming to town today!”

“Y’know, I have the weirdest feeling that the game’s telling me to go outside,” I commented, then did just that. There was indeed an area that looked like a town square outside my character’s house, and it was full of NPCs, who I walked over to.

VILLAGER A: “Eeeeeek?!”

And for some reason, one of the village women immediately started screaming. Just when I thought monsters were attacking the town...

VILLAGER B: “Help! A streaker! Some degenerate man is walking around town naked!”

VILLAGER C: “O-Oh no, it’s true! Gaaaaaah!”

...it turned out that, no, she and the other local women were screaming about JURAI himself!

KNIGHT A: “Ugh! Stop right there, you freak! Seize him, men!”
JURAI was apprehended by the army, convicted of public indecency, and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. He spent the rest of his youth in prison.

GAME OVER

“Game *over*?!”

“Well, what did you expect, Andou?” said Sayumi. “It’s only natural that you’d be arrested, walking around town in the nude like that.”

“In the *nude*?! You mean the main character was supposed to be naked that whole time?!”

“I suppose it *was* rather hard to tell, what with the pixel art style. You did see that you didn’t have anything equipped when you opened your menu, though, didn’t you?”

“You mean that meant I had *nothing* equipped? Like, literally *nothing*?!”

“Yes, exactly. In this game, having no gear equipped means that your character is naked. That feature enables players to challenge themselves to walk around town in the nude and not get caught.”

“I don’t *wanna* play the game like that! And why does the main character sleep in the nude, anyway?!”

“The main character of our game has a hard time falling asleep if he’s not in the nude. It’s an inconvenient habit of his.”

“Ugh... I’ve heard some real people are actually like that, so I can’t come down on it too harshly... B-But then, why didn’t his mom say something about it?!”

“She’s very broad-minded about her son’s foibles.”

“She’s *too* friggin’ broad-minded!”

I was pretty close to totally fed up, but nevertheless, I turned back to the game and hit “CONTINUE.” Once again, JURAI awakened in his room.

“Okay, so, I guess I’m supposed to have him actually go and get dressed?” I muttered to myself, learning from my previous failure. I found a dresser in the corner, opened it up, and obtained a TRACKSUIT, which I equipped immediately. For the moment, I decided not to call out the fact that apparently, a world with demon lords and knights also had tracksuits for some stupid reason.

I spoke with my character’s mom once more, then set out into town! Once again, I’d learned from my failures and didn’t head straight for the square. Instead, I went into the house next door to my character’s home. One of the fundamental rules of RPGs, after all, was to always stray from the beaten path to pick up items everywhere you could! *Can’t believe I forgot something that basic. I really let my guard down!* If I’d given my

room a thorough investigation the first time I'd played the game, I would've found the TRACKSUIT early and avoided that whole disaster!

I walked around the neighbor's house, opening up their dressers and chests, breaking their pots and barrels, and even looting their bookcases while I was at it. In the end, I found 150 gold, a healing herb, and evidence that the town that I was in was called "Startsville." *All right! Now I just have to talk to all the NPCs in town and gather up all the information I can —*

HOMEOWNER: "There he is, guards!"

...or so I'd thought, but suddenly, a character named "Homeowner" burst into the house and started screaming.

HOMEOWNER: "He snuck into my house out of nowhere and started stealing all my money and belongings without saying so much as a word!"
KNIGHT A: "Burgling in broad daylight, eh, you criminal scum?! Seize him, men!"
JURAI was apprehended by the army, convicted of grand larceny, trespassing, breaking and entering, and a laundry list of other crimes, then sentenced to ten years of hard labor. He spent the rest of his youth in prison.

GAME OVER

"I game over'd by getting arrested *again*?!"

"Well, of course you did! You trespassed in someone else's house and helped yourself to their belongings. It's only natural that you'd be arrested."

"In the real world, sure, but come *on*, this is an RPG! That's just how it works in these games!"

"This game's primary theme is the preservation of morality and decorum. Incidentally, it's recommended that you play in a well-lit room and sit at a comfortable distance from the screen."

"I don't *wanna* play a game with that sort of theme!"

In spite of my protests, I hit "Continue" once again. I also resolved to make a point of saving at every step along the way, just to be on the extra safe side. It was pretty clear that I could get slapped with an arbitrary game over at any moment, but I'd be ready for it next time!

To start, I equipped my TRACKSUIT and headed out into the town square to talk with all the villagers. They gave me a bunch of exposition. In short: a legend had been passed down through the royal family's line that when the Demon Lord is revived, a legendary hero would appear here in Startsville. Now that the Demon Lord was back, the king had ordered his knights to go to our town and search for the promised hero. Their only clue

was the knowledge that there would be a distinctive mark somewhere on the hero's body: a six-pointed star.

"Mwa ha haaa! It's totally me! It's me! Me, me, me! *I'm* the legendary hero!" I practically squealed with glee. *God, I seriously can't get enough of these chosen-one-style plots! Now* this *is some classic RPG storytelling!*

"Andou *really* gets into his games, huh...?" commented Tomoyo.

"Juu's always loved talking at the screen when he watches TV or plays games!" said Hatoko.

"Andou's freaky," added Chifuyu.

I decided to ignore them.

Anyway, I had JURAI show his six-pointed star crest to the knights, and their attitudes did an immediate one-eighty! The knights brought JURAI right to the castle for an audience with the king.

KING: "That crest... So, it wasn't just a myth... The legends were true! I am told your name is JURAI. Please, won't you listen to my tale?"

The king then went on to expound on the history and circumstances of his country in *great* detail, but the bit that really mattered was that the seal keeping the Demon Lord imprisoned had been broken, just as prophesied, leading to his resurrection. JURAI was the legendary hero reborn, and the king begged him to go out and put down the Demon Lord. It was pretty by the book as far as setups went.

KING: "I would love to ask you to go slay the Demon Lord immediately... However, some of my vassals have doubts about your power. I must ask you, JURAI, to prove yourself to us. To start, I would like you to defeat the bandits who have been plaguing these lands."

Oh, okay. Guess I have to go level up a bit before I can take on the Demon Lord. A menu appeared to let me select my response, and naturally, I chose "Yes."

KING: "So you'll do it? Wonderful! Before you go, I shall grant you this suit of armor. A TRACKSUIT is hardly fitting garb for a hero! In addition, you may take whatever weapon you please from my armory."

JURAI got a KNIGHT'S ARMOR!

"Oh, riiight. I guess I *was* still wearing a tracksuit, huh?" The cutscene ended and I regained control of my character, so I quickly opened up my menu and swapped the tracksuit out for the knight's armor. My defense

shot *way* up as a result. *All right! Now we're getting into some* real *RPG—*

KNIGHT A: "Wh-What do you think you're doing, fiend?! Why are you taking your clothes off?!"
KNIGHT B: "How dare you expose yourself before the king! Seize him, men!"
JURAI was apprehended by the army, convicted of lèse-majesté by way of indecent exposure, etc. etc.

GAME OVER

"But *why*?!"

"Because you started changing clothes in front of the king, of course!" said Sayumi. "The country this game is set in is an absolute monarchy, remember?"

"Are you *seriously* taking the realism that far?! It's a game! Game characters can change their clothes in a split second!"

"There are changing rooms for you to use when you need to swap out your gear. At the very least, you have to go somewhere nobody's around to see you. It's just common decency."

"It's a pain in the butt, is what it is!"

"This game's theme is the preservation of morality and decorum."

I took a deep breath. "*Fine*!"

I had officially given up. *Who cares if the game is arbitrarily realistic—I'll beat it anyway out of sheer stubbornness!* Thankfully, I'd dropped a save the instant the king's speech had ended, so I was able to continue right where I'd left off.

To start, I left the audience chamber, hid behind a pillar, watched the guards very carefully to make sure I wasn't in their line of sight, and equipped my knight's armor. I let out a sigh of relief once the process was complete and I'd safely clothed myself.

Wait...what sort of game is this even supposed to be, again? Why do I have to feel a whole Metal Gear's worth of tension and accomplishment just to change my clothes?

"Umm, okay, what's next?" I said to myself. "I'm supposed to go pick up a weapon from the armory, right?"

I decided to give the castle a thorough exploration while I was at it...then realized that doing so would probably get me arrested again, so instead, I walked around the castle very, very carefully, making sure not to bump into anything I shouldn't and taking care to politely greet the knights and noblemen I happened to pass by.

I didn't go into any side rooms, and I didn't open a single treasure chest! Searching for items? Who *does* that? This was a king's dwelling, and I had to conduct myself like the well-behaved commoner I was! Step one: behave myself! Step two: keep a low profile! Steps three through five: do *not* disobey anything that anyone tells me to do!

“I-I’m impressed, Andou,” said Sayumi, her tone slightly strained. “You’ve managed to circumvent quite a large number of my traps...”

“Yeah, like, dang...you’re actually pulling off the pathetic commoner act perfectly! You might have a talent for behaving like a miserable peasant,” added Tomoyo.

“Yeah! Juu, you’re awesome! You’re a perfect ordinary villager!” said Hatoko.

“Andou, you’re super ordinary,” commented Chifuyu.

That’s right—the girls were all singing my praises! “Mwa ha ha! *Nobody* acts like an ordinary villager as well as I do!” I boasted, then immediately got depressed. *I don’t wanna play this game anymore! It’s way too stressful!* I kept playing anyway, though, and eventually managed to crawl and cower my way all the way to the armory.

GUARD: “Oh, hey! The king told me about you. Feel free to take whatever you want.”

I took the armory guard up on his offer and started searching around for a weapon. A moment later, though, a cutscene started playing.

SHWING! The crest on JURAI’s hand began to glow!

“What is this strange light...? It’s like something’s calling out to me...”

JURAI found himself drawn toward a single rust-covered sword in the back of the storeroom.

GUARD: “Huh? Oh, don’t even bother with THAT sword. It’s more rust than steel at this point!”

JURAI ignored the guard’s words. He found himself instinctively reaching for the blade.

SCHWIIIIIING! The moment JURAI touched the sword’s hilt, his crest began to throb, as if it was resonating with the blade!

A moment later...the rust began to crack as it fell away from the sword!

Motes of rust were scattering to the ground, as though the blade were weeping tears of joy at having been reunited with its true owner.

Soon, all the corrosion had been shed, and the blade was restored to its former glory.

GUARD: “I-I’ve heard stories about this... They say that a thousand years ago, the hero struck down the Demon Lord with a legendary blade! And look—that six-pointed crest on its hilt! Could it be that this whole time, that rusty sword was...?”

All riiight! Now this is a plot twist! Getting chosen by a legendary weapon? Love it! A weapon resonating with its destined owner? Perfection!

GUARD: “It must be! The legendary Blade of Thrashing, Overpowering, Massacring, Annihilating, Terrorizing, and Obliterating! Also known as...”
JURAI got a TOMATO!

“That name sucks!” Like, seriously, are you kidding me? You worked all those amazing, awesome words into the name, just to abbreviate it to friggin’ “tomato”?!

“The Demon Lord’s one weakness is the legendary sword, TOMATO,” explained Sayumi. “He’s capable of resisting any and all attacks that are thrown at him, with the sole exception of TOMATO attacks, which he simply can’t stand.”

“You *know* you’re making it sound like the Demon Lord’s a little kid who won’t eat his tomatoes, right?” I sighed.

In any case, though, I’d finally found myself a weapon! I left the castle, went out into the overworld, and made my way toward the bandits’ base. A few steps across the world map later, I had my first random encounter! It was finally time for a real battle! *This has been a long journey already...*

A BLUE GELATINOUS ORGANISM appeared!

Yeah. Okay. I get it. Not gonna take the bait.

“If you’ll give me a moment, Andou, I’d like to explain the battle system to you,” said Sayumi.

“Huh? Nah, you don’t have to bother,” I replied. “I’ve played enough games to have a sense for these things.”

“I recommend you take the time to listen! Our game’s battle system is somewhat unusual. It makes use of an exceedingly groundbreaking technology that we’ve taken to calling the Shout and Pose System.”

“‘Shout and Pose’?” I repeated, cocking my head.

“In short, the system is capable of detecting both your speech and your movements. In order to issue commands in our game’s battles, the player must say particular things and make particular gestures, the specifics of which vary from situation to situation. The manner in which you move and speak determines both the damage you deal and the probability that your attack will hit.”

“Ooh, dang! That’s kind of awesome!”

“All right, Andou, please stand up. Face the screen head-on, then choose a suitable phrase and pose for your attack.”

I stood up as Sayumi told me, my heart swelling with excitement and anticipation. Getting to play an NES-level RPG like this using voice and motion controls was totally beyond my expectations! I glared at the blue

gelatinous organism on the screen, placing one hand on the imaginary sheath at my waist and smiling dauntlessly as I did my best to step fully into our protagonist JURAI's shoes.

"Foul monster, birthed of darkness pure! Feel the piercing bite of my TOMATO and vanish into the aether from whence you came!" I shouted, crouching down into a combat-ready stance. I have to say, it was a *really* cool line if you ignored my weapon's name. "Heavenly Roar of the Andous Style, Final Esotericism: Dashing Waves of the Swallow Blade!"

It only took an instant. My blade flickered from its sheath, slicing through the air faster than the eye could see as I bisected my enemy without the slightest hint of hesitation—or as I went through the motion of it, anyway!

Dashing Waves of the Swallow Blade was the Heavenly Roar of the Andous Style's fastest sword skill. The user unsheathes their blade with the swiftness and grace of a swallow in flight, carving any and every enemy within the technique's area of effect into minuscule pieces in the blink of an eye! *Man, I wish any of this stuff I'm saying right now was actually true!*

"Pitiful creature… I pray that death, at least, shall grant you the peace you could never seek in life," I muttered, channeling both the compassion of a warrior who pitied the sad fool he'd just cut down and the emptiness of a man who'd grown *too* strong to feel anything anymore into my words as I turned my back to the screen. My sword slid its way back into its sheath with a sharp, final *click*—which I made with my mouth, for lack of a real weapon.

Mwa ha ha ha…perfection! How's that for acting out a special move?! I don't even need to ask—that was a critical hit, no question about it! I looked back to the screen…only to find the blue gelatinous organism in the exact same state it'd been in when I'd stood up.

"H-Huh…? Oh, I get it. Yeah, that makes sense—I have to actually select 'Attack' after I finish my move!" I picked out the "Attack" option in the battle menu.

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JURAI attacks. Shwing! BLUE GELATINOUS ORGANISM takes 5 damage.
BLUE GELATINOUS ORGANISM attacks. Wham! JURAI takes 2 damage.
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"Ugh! Impossible! How could it withstand my Dashing Waves of the Swallow Blade?!"

It seemed that the Shout and Pose System worked on a much harder grading criteria than I'd expected. *Interesting! I'm not one to back down from a challenge!* I struck a pose, ready to unleash another ultimate move…but then I noticed something. Chifuyu aside, the remaining members of our club all seemed to be writhing on the floor, clutching their sides and slapping the ground… *Wait. Huh? Are they laughing? Why?*

Just as I began to question the situation, Chifuyu gave me a confused glance and spoke up. "Andou? What are you shouting about?"

“What do you mean, Chifuyu? I’m just doing my best to play the game, that’s all! I’m trying to give the Shout and Pose System a serious test!”

“The game doesn’t have a system like that,” said Chifuyu—who, let it not be forgotten, had been a member of its dev team—with an air of casual indifference.

For a moment, my mind completely shut down. Huh? There’s no voice and motion recognition system? It’s just a normal RPG? So then, this whole time...

“You set me up, Sayumi!”

“M-My apologies... The whatever it was System was too expensive to implement, and it was tragically cut in development... *Pfff*! Aha ha ha ha!” Sayumi cackled, trembling with mirth.

Curses, she got me good this time! And it was super obvious too! There’s no way an indie game made by a bunch of high schoolers in their spare time would have a system that advanced! And the computer doesn’t even have a webcam or a microphone hooked up to it!

Gaaah, the shame! All that full-power shouting and posing was pointless! The only part that mattered was when I hit “Attack” afterward!

“Ha ha ha ha, oh god,” said Tomoyo, who was desperately trying to catch her breath. “*Seriously*, Andou, how did it take you *that* long to notice?!”

“Curse you, Tomoyo...! How dare you all make a fool of me!”

“And wait, back up a minute. ‘Heavenly Roar of the Andous Style’? What the hell sort of name is *that*?!”

“Sh-Shut up, you! It signifies that the Andou Clan’s secret techniques are powerful enough to shake the heavens above!”

I decided to get back to the game before that line of inquiry could go any further. A few basic attacks later, the blue gelatinous organism was defeated. I got some EXP and gold for my trouble, then I was sent back to the overworld, where I proceeded onward toward the bandits’ hideout. I got into a few more encounters along the way and wiped out all the monsters involved easily enough, earning myself a level up before I reached my destination. The whole process was pretty easy, and I felt like I was making good progress.

Finally, I arrived at the bandits’ hideout. I dropped a save, talked to a character that looked like a bandit boss, and was thrown into a battle with him immediately. He was, in fact, a BANDIT BOSS, and while he was tougher than the monsters I’d crushed on the way there, he didn’t have any crazy special attacks, and I was still able to take him down without much trouble. There was a treasure chest behind him, which I quickly opened up.

`JURAI got a HADESIUM ORE!`

“Ooh, nice! That sounds like a pretty important item!”

I hurried back to the castle to report my victory over the bandits to the king. As a reward for my success, the king formally acknowledged JURAI as

the legendary hero's reincarnation and asked that I march upon the Demon Lord's citadel.

"We're heading straight for the final boss's lair, huh? I guess the game's almost over?"

"Correct," said Sayumi. "The next dungeon is also the last one. The scale of our game was limited by the circumstances of its development."

The king had one final thing to tell me before my audience with him concluded. "Come to think of it, the armory guard told me he had something to speak with you about," said the king, dropping an incredibly obvious plot hook. I took the bait and headed straight to the armory.

GUARD: "Hey! I have something to tell you about the TOMATO. I got curious after you unsealed it and read through some ancient texts, and I discovered that it's supposed to have a second, more powerful form!"

Oh, does it now? Sounds like my signature weapon's about to get a power up! Even more so than the stat boost, I was excited by the prospect of the weapon potentially getting to ditch its horrible name. It was really hard to get hyped about the battles when you were swinging a sword with a name like *that* around every turn!

GUARD: "The thing is, you need an item called HADESIUM ORE to upgrade the sword... Huh? You already have some? Then let's hurry up and give it a try!"
JURAI combined the TOMATO and the HADESIUM ORE.
SCHWIIIIIING!
The seal on his hand began to emit a brilliant light!
GUARD: "Looks like it worked! This is the legendary blade's true form. It's said to be the most powerful of demonic swords, capable of channeling the forces of hell itself into each and every swing! It's called the legendary Blade of Thrashing, Overpowering, Massacring, Annihilating, and Hellish Total Obliteration! Also known as..."
JURAI got a TOMAHTO!

"A *tomahto*?! The pronunciation got more specific?! That's *it*?!"

"Congratulations, Andou," said Sayumi. "You've obtained the most powerful weapon in the world."

"The most powerful weapon in the world's named after a vegetable?!"

"It also comes with a special move: the Lycopene Slash."

"Sounds nice and nutritious!"

It seemed there was just no escaping the power of the tomato. And it sounded so awesome before they abbreviated it too! I wanted to fight with a

cool weapon, dangit! I wanted to mow down my foes with style wielding Gungnir, or Excalibur, or something!

In any case, I got on a boat that the king prepared for me, my ultimate weapon in hand. My destination: the island upon which the Demon Lord's citadel was situated.

"So, wait... The Demon Lord was resurrected a few days ago, and he *already* has a citadel?"

"Try not to question it. If you absolutely need an explanation, you can just go ahead and assume that the castle was restored alongside the Demon Lord, or that he took over a castle that was already there."

Soon, I arrived at the island. A fortress shrouded in ominous black fog sat smack dab in its center. "I'm sure this foul miasma keeps ordinary people away from the citadel," I muttered, "but I cannot afford to fall back here! Prepare yourself, Demon Lord! I swear I shall strike you down!" I charged right into the castle without hesitating for a second! Yes, I was the very picture of heroic courage!

"How very brave of you…except for the part where you dropped a save right before you went in," sighed Tomoyo.

Hey, that's just RPG basics! Courage and caution go hand in hand!

The screen transitioned to a castle's interior, and an ominous instrumental track started playing in the background. I proceeded onward, smacking down one random encounter after another as I went! The TOMAHTO was powerful indeed, and even though this was the final dungeon, I sliced through it as smoothly as a hot knife through butter. Before long, I arrived at a massive, sturdy-looking door labeled the Gateway of Time.

"The Gateway of Time?! Okay, there's *gotta* be a boss behind this door!" I saved, then stepped through.

???: "Heh heh heh! I'm impressed you've made it this far, JURAI."

A girl stood alone in the center of the next room.

???: "I am the first of the Four Heavenly Kings, the sovereign ruler of time: TOMOYO GODEDGE!"

"*T-Tomoyo* showed up in the game?!" I exclaimed in shock.

"The Demon Lord's Four Heavenly Kings were all modeled after the literary club's female members," Sayumi explained.

Tomoyo gave me a grin and a nod. "That's right! And that means if you want to move ahead, you'll have to beat me first!"

"I get it... You're really making this interesting, huh?" I replied, turning back to the game.

TOMOYO: “You’re not even worth the Demon Lord’s time!”

“Mwa ha ha! *Somebody’s* certainly talking like a third-rate mook, isn’t she, Tomoyo? I guess I shouldn’t have expected much out of the *first* of the Four Heavenly Kings!”

“Wha—?! C-Can it, Andou! For the record, I’m *super* tough to beat!”

“Hah! The first king of the classic four-man miniboss squad is *always* a chump! They *look* unbeatable, sure, but the second and third always end up overshadowing the first so much that at the end you look back and are all, ‘Huh? Wait, who was the first one again?’ The first Heavenly King’s *always* forgettable!”

“Where do you get off disrespecting all the first Heavenly Kings out there?! Apologize!”

TOMOYO: “Heh heh heh! This is your last chance to beg for mercy! Not that I’ll give it to you, regardless!”

“Okay, seriously, *see*? That is *such* a mook line!”

“Why you little... Just wait! Her next line’s gonna scare you so bad, you’ll be going pale and dripping with cold sweat before you know it!”

“Ha ha ha! After *that* setup? Not even possible! Once you realize that a villain’s a mook, they’ll be a mook for the rest of the game!” I advanced the text with complete confidence that I’d be fine, no matter what she said!

TOMOYO: “Oh, by the way, you’re not allowed to save past this point.”

“Wh-What?!” I found myself going pale and dripping with cold sweat before I knew it!

“See? Told you!” boasted Tomoyo with a self-satisfied chuckle.

Come on, that’s not fair! You can’t just ban saving in the last dungeon! What sorta sadistic game design is that?!

“Hmph... Fine, then! I just have to win on my first try! I believe in you, JURAI!” I moved the conversation along, and the boss battle began!

A TOMOYO appeared!
JURAI attacks. Whoosh! TOMOYO dodged the attack.
TOMOYO: “Heh heh! Let you be trapped betwixt the hands of time and wander forever the realm of eternity!”
TOMOYO uses CLOSED CLOCK! The world comes to a standstill! Only TOMOYO can move.
TOMOYO’s turn never ends! TOMOYO unleashes her berserker soul!
TOMOYO attacks. JURAI takes 213 damage.
TOMOYO attacks. JURAI takes 245 damage.
TOMOYO makes a desperate attack! JURAI takes 608 damage.

TOMOYO attacks. JURAI takes 238 damage.
JURAI was defeated!

“TOMOYO’s friggin’ OP AF!”

“Heh heh! I told you that I’m super tough to beat, didn’t I?”

“Come on, though, that’s just straight up unfair! ‘Tough to beat’ implies *possible* to beat! That was a no-warning instakill!” *She shouldn’t be using* Closed Clock*, period! Stopping time’s basically cheating by its very nature!* “Man, what am I supposed to do about this...? Did I miss an item or something? Bosses like this usually have some sorta trick you can... Wait, huh?”

I’d been ready to hit the “Continue” button and take a second stab at the fight, but that’s when it hit me—I hadn’t actually gotten a Game Over screen! A cutscene was playing instead!

“Wait, so I *didn’t* lose?”

JURAI forces himself upright once more!

“Oh... *Oh*! I get it! This is one of those battles that you’re *supposed* to lose!”

TOMOYO was one of those bosses you see in RPGs sometimes that are designed to be totally unbeatable! Operating under the assumption that I wasn’t *supposed* to win against her, her cheat-level skills didn’t feel that egregious after all. And I knew where this was going as well—JURAI refusing to give in and rising once more on the brink of defeat was a sure sign he was about to go through some sort of awakening!

JURAI rises up again. JURAI looks at Tomoyo with respect.
Do you wish to add JURAI to your party?
TOMOYO selects YES.
JURAI joins TOMOYO’s team!

“Everything about that was friggin’ backward!” I screamed, unable to bear it any longer. “Why’s the protagonist flipping sides like some sorta wandering monster?!”

“TOMOYO thrashed him so badly, he ended up admiring her strength! Man, JURAI really is a hopeless mook, isn’t he?” said Tomoyo with an insufferably smug smirk. *Curse that girl for abusing her dev privileges!*

TOMOYO: “You want to beat the Demon Lord? Hmm. I’ve been getting pretty fed up with his crap anyway, so why not? I’ll help you beat him.”

Ohh, I get it. So that's the sort of plot they're going for! TOMOYO's joining my party so that we can go beat the Demon Lord together! I mean, technically I'm joining her party, but same difference, really.

Having made the miniboss my ally (or rather, having been made the ally of the miniboss), I moved on past the Gateway of Time and reached a new door that was labeled the Gateway of Elements and Genesis.

"Hmm... I have a funny feeling that a certain two characters will be behind this one!"

HATOKO: "Heh heh heh! You're finally here, Hero!"
CHIFUYU: "Good job making it this far."
HATOKO: "I'm the second of the Four Heavenly Kings, the Overlord of Elements: HATOKO COMBRIVER!"
CHIFUYU: "I'm the Empress of Genesis, CHIFUYU CHIFUYU CHIFUYU."

It was just as I'd expected—I'd have to face off against two of the Heavenly Kings at once! Also, Chifuyu's fantasy name was weirdly reminiscent of the scientific name for the western lowland gorilla.

"All right! It's time for us to fight, Juu!" Hatoko excitedly declared.

"Fair and square, Andou," added Chifuyu.

"Mwa ha ha... I'll take that challenge! It's on! Bring it, both of you at once!" I said, bluffing my rear off. In truth, I wasn't even slightly confident. The first of the Heavenly Kings had put me through the thrashing of a lifetime, and now I had to take on *two* at once? *Oh, but I've got TOMOYO on my side this time! Maybe that'll even the odds...?*

A HATOKO and a CHIFUYU appeared!
TOMOYO used CLOSED CLOCK! The world came to a standstill.
Only TOMOYO can move!
But before she did, HATOKO used OVER ELEMENT to freeze herself!
But before she did, CHIFUYU used WORLD CREATE to create a personal shelter to hide in!
TOMOYO attacks. HATOKO takes 2 damage.
TOMOYO attacks. CHIFUYU takes 3 damage.
TOMOYO attacks. HATOKO takes 5 damage.
TOMOYO attacks. CHIFUYU takes 1 damage.
CLOSED CLOCK's effect has worn off!
HATOKO attacks.
HATOKO: "Here goooes! Dragon attack!"
HATOKO uses her special move: FIVE-DRAGON SUMMONING! Dragons of wind, fire, water, earth, and light attack JURAI at once. Jurai takes 555555 damage.
Chifuyu attacks.
CHIFUYU: "Bang. Bang. Baaang."

CHIFUYU uses her special move: ALL-OUT FIRING LINE! CHIFUYU creates all sorts of firearms that unload on TOMOYO at once. But when she does, TOMOYO uses CLOSED CLOCK! TOMOYO dodged the attack.
JURAI's body was riddled with bullets!

"JURAI's friggin' weak AF!" He couldn't even hold a candle to the Heavenly Kings! He wasn't keeping up with the game's power creep at *all*!

As I lamented Jurai's impotence, the other three characters carried on the fight. With the player character dead as a doorknob, all I could do was sit there and watch the battle play out. *Actually, could this game maybe* not *describe everything that happens to JURAI's body while he's unconscious? Really feels like we're violating some sort of RPG taboo here!*

"Seriously, though, aren't the Four Heavenly Kings in this game just way too strong?" I grumbled.

"But Juu," said Hatoko, "isn't this basically what would happen if we ever fought for real?"

"Andou, your power's super weak," added Chifuyu. The two of them had the funniest way of saying the most hurtful things without meaning to. And, yes, I admit it, my *Dark and Dark* probably wouldn't be any match for the others' powers, but still...

I absentmindedly watched the battle play out. Eventually, TOMOYO somehow managed to take the other two down, and as I'd more or less expected, they ended up joining the party. Three out of four Heavenly Kings were now on JURAI's side. It seemed the goal of the game was to recruit all four Heavenly Kings (aka literary club members), then go defeat the Demon Lord with them. *Man, this Demon Lord's really not very popular with his subordinates, is he?*

"Guess Sayumi's up next, huh?" I speculated. To be completely honest...I was *terrified* of the upcoming battle. Heck, I was more scared of it than I was of the final boss! I mean, come on—I'd be up against *Sayumi*! She put the "s" in "sadism"! No amount of caution could possibly have prepared me to take *her* on!

"Gaaah, screw it! What happens, happens!" I shouted, mustering up what little courage I had left and stepping through the door!

???: "I'm impressed you've managed to make it this far."

A solitary woman stood in the center of a dimly lit room. She was drawn in the same pixel art style as everything else in the game, yet somehow, she managed to exude an overpowering aura of intensity.

???: "I am the last of the Four Heavenly Kings, SAYUMI HIGH LA FRANCE."

A cutscene began immediately, and I was caught off guard as my supposed comrades TOMOYO, HATOKO, and CHIFUYU left the party to walk over and stand by SAYUMI's side!

"Huh? Y-You're kidding... They came all this way to betray me at the last minute?" *I mean, okay, it's not like we were the closest of teams to begin with or anything!* I was more than a little bewildered, but I pressed on into the cutscene, only to get slammed by an even more shocking plot twist a single line later.

SAYUMI: "We've eagerly awaited your return, JURAI. Or should I call you 'the Demon Lord'?"

My jaw dropped. "Huh?" JURAI? The Demon Lord? The protagonist was the Demon Lord this whole time?!

Meanwhile, the cutscene continued. The Four Heavenly Kings all knelt before JURAI, and Sayumi began explaining what had happened. She said that a thousand years ago, the Demon Lord was defeated by humanity's Hero. The Demon Lord and his Four Heavenly Kings had planned for such an eventuality, though, and ensured that they would all be reincarnated far into the future.

The Demon Lord, however, added a detail to his own reincarnation: he would return as a human. Why? Simple: he wished to learn firsthand of the human heart. He would willingly give up the tremendous power he possessed, obtain the strange power that humanity seemed to wield, and bring the world to heel for good.

Thankfully, the humans themselves played right into his hands. They came up with an all too convenient legend that spoke of how their Hero's reincarnation would awaken upon the Demon Lord's revival. Humans always had a way of assuming that everything would work out in their favor...but needless to say, there wasn't so much as a scrap of truth to the legend. The Hero would not return. It was only through a stroke of cruel irony that the Demon Lord himself was mistaken as the second coming of his greatest foe.

"Wh-Whoaaa," I muttered, stricken all but speechless by the story. Seriously, where did this plot twist come from? I didn't see it coming at all! I thought this would be a totally boilerplate RPG, but now it's throwing me for a major loop at the very end of the plot!

TOMOYO: "We chose to fight you to assess your current strength, Your Lordship."
HATOKO: "It's too bad though. You were asleep for so long that you lost almost all of your power!"
CHIFUYU: "And your memory too. That was bad."
SAYUMI: "Please, Your Lordship, try to remember! Remember your unparalleled arrogance and brutality! Remember the atrocities

you inflicted upon your foes and the almighty power with which you committed them! Remember how you were meant to be!”
SAYUMI touches JURAI and uses ROUTE OF ORIGIN! JURAI returns to the way he was meant to be!
JURAI: “G-Gaaahhhhhhhhh!”
JURAI: “My head...! It hurts so much!”
JURAI fell to the ground. His head throbbed violently as his memories—the memories of the Demon Lord—returned to him!
JURAI: “Mwa ha ha... Mwa ha ha ha! MWAAA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA! That’s right... I remember now. It was me all along... I am the Demon Lord!”
JURAI reclaims the Demon Lord’s power!
JURAI reaches level 99!
JURAI’s stats are all set to MAX!

It was one of the most abrupt and audacious power-ups I’d ever seen, but I wasn’t quite ready to celebrate. The plot was moving so fast I couldn’t keep up with it, much less predict where it was going to go next. *What’s going to happen now? Am I gonna spend the rest of the game playing as the Demon Lord and bringing the world to ruin?*

SAYUMI: “Incredible... Your power is so immense, just standing beside you sends a shiver down my spine! You’ve finally regained your full strength, haven’t you, Your Lordship?”
JURAI: “It’s been a while, SAYUMI. And the rest of you as well, my ever-obedient Four Kings.”
SAYUMI: “Now that you’ve learned of the human heart, you have no weaknesses to exploit! And if that weren’t enough, you wield the strongest weapon in the world, the legendary TOMAHTO! You have nothing left to fear, Your Lordship. The time has come for you to cast down the humans and turn this world into a new Demon Realm!”

1: That’s right. Let chaos reign and the world be undone!
2: ...

“A dialogue option, huh...?” In other words, my decision here would determine how JURAI would go on to live his life as the Demon Lord.

Heh! As if I even need to think about it! The correct choice is obvious, and I know exactly what I’m going to do next!

“Time to drop a save, first of all... Gah, crap! I forgot—I’m playing on no-save hell mode!”

“Would it kill you to be decisive just this once?” Tomoyo sighed.

Cut me some slack, okay?! Making a new save every time you hit a decision might look sorta pathetic, but it’s a habit that all gamers share!

Without the ability to save, though, I was forced to follow my heart and select option 2.

JURAI: “...”
SAYUMI: “What’s wrong, Your Lordship?”
JURAI: “Stop calling me that. I’m nobody’s lord...and my name is JURAI!”
SAYUMI: “Wha—?!”
JURAI: “SAYUMI. TOMOYO. HATOKO. CHIFUYU. Sorry, but I changed my mind. I won’t be bringing the humans to heel after all.”
SAYUMI: “But why?! Now that you’ve learned of the human heart, you should be undefeatable!”
JURAI: “True. I did indeed learn of the human heart, just as planned. However...I’m afraid to say I learned too much. I’ve grown rather fond of the humans, it would seem.”
SAYUMI: “You? Fond of the humans? But you used to scorn and despise them for their weakness, foolishness, and avarice! Did you not loathe their foolish society, which values the station one was born into above their own merits as an individual?!”
JURAI: “Perhaps their society may seem foolish at first glance, but I’ve learned the truth. I’ve learned that humanity has an entirely unique value to it. Humanity understands the importance of morality and decorum, and that’s something we monsters could never appreciate.”

Okay, gotta admit, I was not expecting the game’s main theme to tie into the story like that.

JURAI: “Humans are foolish, laughable creatures, it’s true. They dreamed up the fantasy that I, the Demon Lord reborn, was instead their Hero returned to them, and they foisted all the responsibility for their future off onto my shoulders.”
SAYUMI: “All the more reason to—”
JURAI: “But I was even more laughable than they were! Though I could never explain how or why, I felt the urge to rise to meet those foolish humans’ expectations. I felt the urge to save them—to live by their side in peace...”
JURAI felt the desire to live not as the Demon Lord...but instead as the Hero.
SAYUMI’s eyes blazed with a new, dangerous light.
SAYUMI: “Well, then...it would seem Your Lordship’s long slumber has muddled your memories. No matter. We will open your eyes—by force, if we have to!”

The screen swirled in upon itself as a battle began! On one side: JURAI, the newly awakened Demon Lord. On the other: all four of the Heavenly Kings, all at once. The final battle was about to begin!

TOMOYO: “Hero my foot! You think you can just gloss over everything that’s happened that easily?”
HATOKO: “You’re going to forgive the humans? After they spent so, so long torturing and persecuting our people...?”
JURAI: “I don’t know about that... I don’t know what’s right either. All that I know is that right now, I’d rather save people than destroy them. There has to be some way for humans and demons to coexist, right?”
CHIFUYU: “Your Lordship...”

As far as final battles go, it was, in a word, perfect. JURAI’s newly awakened powers were tremendous, but with foes like those four, he couldn’t afford to let his guard down for so much as a second! If I’d cast the wrong spell or used a healing item at the wrong time, I would’ve lost in an instant. It was down to the wire, and I thought I was doomed time after time. Nevertheless, as the battle wore on, my friends—my former allies—fell one after the other.

TOMOYO: “Of course this is how it’d end... You’ve always been strong. That’s why I decided to follow you in the first place.”
TOMOYO was defeated!

HATOKO: “I’ve always understood. I’ve always known that deep down, our Demon Lord was kinder than anyone else!”
HATOKO was defeated!

CHIFUYU: “I’ll never leave you, Your Lordship.”
CHIFUYU was defeated!

I was left with but a single foe: SAYUMI HIGH LA FRANCE, the last of the Four Heavenly Kings.

SAYUMI: “Have you forgotten the calamities you wrought upon this world a thousand years ago? Do you truly believe a few good deeds will be enough for the humans to accept you after all that you’ve done?”
JURAI: “I know. I’ll never expect them to forgive me. But be that as it may...I want to atone.”

The ensuing battle was truly ferocious. It was an all-out back-and-forth, with neither side allowing the other a moment’s rest. Yes, it was the sort of

battle that would be passed down through the generations as a legend...but every legend has its conclusion.

SAYUMI: “He he he... I suppose I was no match for the Demon Lord after all.”
SAYUMI was defeated!

JURAI approached SAYUMI’s fallen form.
JURAI: “Why, Sayumi? Why didn’t you fight me with your full strength?”
SAYUMI: “Oh? Whatever could you mean...?”
JURAI: “Don’t play dumb with me. If you’d used ROUTE OF ORIGIN, you could’ve recovered all your stamina and MP in an instant! You could’ve healed the other Heavenly Kings as well! So why...?”
SAYUMI: “He he he... I simply wished to place my hope in someone as well. Just as the humans entrusted the world to their reborn Hero...so too did I wish to entrust the world to you.”
JURAI: “Then you can rest easy. I’ll live up to those expectations, I promise you. I’ll turn this world into a wonderful place for man and demon alike! So please...lend me your strength, O Four Heavenly Kings. Won’t you fight by my side once more?”
The Four Heavenly Kings nodded without hesitation, happily accepting JURAI’s offer.
And so, JURAI’s long fight to unite the worlds of man and demon began.
It was a long road, fraught with pain and peril. Atonement did not come easily to the former Demon Lord.
The moment mankind realized his true identity, they turned their backs on him. Once again, he was persecuted as a monster.
However, JURAI accepted humanity’s reproach. He and his Four Heavenly Kings worked tirelessly for the sake of peace.
No matter what he did, he could never erase the sins that the Demon Lord of a thousand years prior had committed. There were times when JURAI considered atoning with his own death. Deep down, though, he knew that would be a poor recompense for what he’d done.
No, he would bet his life on the future...and spend it for the sake of the world.
Such was the path that JURAI chose for himself.
When all was said and done, JURAI was no Hero. Far from it—he was the Demon Lord himself, the root of all evil. He was worse than a fraud. He was unqualified for heroism on a fundamental level.

And yet, that was precisely what gave him his strength. In knowing that he was no Hero, JURAI gained a stronger desire to be one than anyone else possessed.
And, as the years passed by...
JURAI would one day be remembered as the truest Hero of them all.

Fin

I was stunned. Speechless. There were simply no words. How could I have ever been prepared for a SNES-style RPG to move me to the core? Hoooly crap. JURAI was hella, hella cool! I get you, JURAI, I really do. Don't worry—as long as your heart's in the right place, you'll be the most heroic Hero of them all! Someday, I know you'll find it in you to forgive yourself...

I felt such a deep empathetic bond with the protagonist that I was on the brink of tears. Meanwhile, an epic orchestral piece was playing as the credits scrolled across the screen. I read the other literary club members' names one by one, still basking in the afterglow of that moving final scene, when suddenly the music shifted in tone. The tempo of the tune picked up, and as I leaned in to try to figure out what was happening, an explosion popped up in the middle of the screen, revealing...

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ANDOU JURAI!

...an enormous message in a big, bold font, dominating the entire screen! I gasped and spun around to look behind me without even thinking about it. At the same time, I heard a series of loud pops—the others had pulled party poppers out from who knows where, and they must have been waiting for that precise moment.

"Happy birthday!" said all four of them at once as I was showered with streamers and confetti.

"He he he!" chuckled Sayumi. "So, Andou? How do you like your surprise present from the literary club?"

"S-Surprise present...? You mean, this game was...?"

"A one-of-a-kind RPG created just for you. We were lying when we said that we'd made it for the cultural festival."

"We worked really hard on it too! We did our best to make something you'd like, Juu!" added Hatoko.

"I put a lot of work in," said Chifuyu.

"We had to rush things, and it turned out a bit weird, so just ignore all the bugs and stuff," Tomoyo chimed in.

"Oh...right," I said. "I guess today *is* my birthday, huh?"

My parents named me Jurai since it sounded a little like my birth month, July. Nobody had said so much as a word about it all day, though, so I'd been convinced that they'd all forgotten. Turns out, no, they'd remembered all right—their silence was just all part of their plan.

They did all this for me? They'd really gotten me this time, and I couldn't come up with even a single witty comment. I just stood there, frozen. Eventually, Chifuyu walked over and peered up at my face.

"Are you crying, Andou?"

I gasped and rubbed my eyes. I really *was* tearing up a little. Actually, I was just sobbing, straight up.

"Huh? Wait, what're you *crying* for, Andou?!" Tomoyo exclaimed. She sounded even more embarrassed about it than I was.

"If our game was enough to move you to tears, then I suppose it was worth all the effort we put into making it," said Sayumi with one of her ever-mature smiles.

"I'm n-not crying at all!" I snapped, quickly wiping away my tears.

"Aha ha ha, you don't have to be shy about it, Juu!" giggled Hatoko. I felt myself blush.

Curses! This is all that stupidly moving story's fault! I was already on the verge of tears before they caught me off guard with this surprise present stuff! Anyone would cry after that! Damnations... This is so frustrating in the most weirdly embarrassing way...

"These aren't tears, they're, uhh," I floundered, desperately looking for an excuse. "They're...jizz! Right, that's it!"

"Holy crap, Andou, I know you're panicking, but that was the *worst* possible excuse you could've gone with!" shouted Tomoyo.

"Hey, Hatoko? What's jizz?" asked Chifuyu.

"Good question! I'm not sure. Maybe it has something to do with jazz? Hey, Tomoyo, what's jizz?"

"U-Uhh, I-I-I-I, I mean, umm... P-Pass, Sayumi!"

"*Ahem*, *ahem*! T-Tomoyo, I'd prefer it if you'd keep this particular hot potato for yourself."

While I was mopping my tears up, the others were descending into some sort of uproar for whatever reason. I took a few deep breaths, made sure I'd put myself together, then turned to look at them once more.

"Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, Sayumi...thank you so much! I'll treasure this game for the rest of my life!"

The four of them smiled back at me. *Sheesh, you guys... You know you've made this the best birthday I've ever had, right?* They'd injected a dose of pure happiness into my perfectly ordinary everyday tedium, and I found myself honestly wishing that our lives would carry on this way forever.

Day in the Life

Puzzle & Tales of Dragon Fantasy DEV LOG

Sayumi

Tomoyo? About your portion of the game's script...

Tomoyo

Yeah? Is there a problem?

Sayumi

For the most part, no... However, I was wondering if there was any particular reason why you named the protagonist Yoshiki Crossdoll Dynn Welt Fraize Rogar Eternerrant. It's rather long, wouldn't you say?

Tomoyo

O-Oh, that. Well, umm... The protagonist's named Yoshiki, but he's actually been reincarnated over and over again in the backstory, right? So, like, every time he comes back, he gets a new name and a new power, and, umm...

Sayumi

...

Tomoyo

A-And there's more! See the name right in the middle, 'Welt'? That means 'world' in German! At the end of the story, people start taking on the name 'Welt' with the goal of bringing the whole world together as one, and—

Sayumi

Let's allow the player to name the protagonist themself, shall we?

Tomoyo

...Okay.

Sayumi

While we're at it, the proper nouns are getting to be a bit much. Let's keep it simple and go with 'Hero,' 'Demon Lord,' and 'Magic.'

Tomoyo

C-Come on, that's just too much!

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Chapter 5: Convalescence, Preceding Upheaval

Our daily lives of peace and quiet did not last forever. Tranquility is, by its very nature, easily disrupted, and the commonplace is all too quick to unravel. Half a year after the five of us met, as the lingering scent of late summer slowly faded from the air and September set in, a certain incident would grant me a profound and personal appreciation for those facts.

On that day, the members of my literary club were engulfed in a mysterious light and lost consciousness. When we came to, we realized that we'd awakened to supernatural powers. The situation was so dumbfounding, so beyond the pale, that all of us found ourselves at a loss. Yes, even me.

It would take quite some time for us to accept the situation, and even after that point, we spent day after day testing our powers and discussing their implications. One or two weeks after we were thrown into those most exceptional of circumstances, when the fatigue of it all was beginning to wear on us in a physical and emotional sense, I reached a decision.

"I believe that I should use my power to erase all of our abilities," I declared to the others. *Route of Origin*, the power I had awakened to, granted me the ability to return anything to the way it was meant to be. "Tomoyo's *Closed Clock*. Hatoko's *Over Element*. Chifuyu's *World Create*. My *Route of Origin*. And finally, Andou's black flames. I propose that we make use of my power to do away with all of them."

Our powers' names, for what it's worth, were Andou's doing. He had insisted that we leave the task of coming up with them to him, and the rest of us had acquiesced without much resistance. I was actually pleased that he'd taken it on, at first—our powers would surely be easier to discuss once they had proper names—but that was before I realized that the names he chose would all be informed by his profoundly, regrettably cringey sense of personal aesthetics. Worse still, he had ended up overthinking his own power—the ability to create black flames that didn't burn—to such an extent that he *still* hadn't managed to settle on a name for it.

But I digress.

Route of Origin was capable of returning anything with a physical form, organic or inorganic, to the way it was meant to be. It followed, then, that it was capable of returning one who had been granted superpowers to their former state as a normal, unpowered individual.

"Man was not meant to wield powers such as these. I believe we should rid ourselves of them and return to our former lives as ordinary students. This is the most assuredly peaceful option available to us, and the one that will serve our best interests the most effectively."

I firmly believed that we were not meant to have these powers—that humanity on the whole was not meant to have them. Thankfully, when I explained my thoughts to the members of my club, they silently nodded in agreement. It seemed they were convinced.

"I'm glad to see that you understand what's best for us. In that case, I will—"

"Wait just a second—I object!" cried the one member who *hadn't* nodded, raising his hand mere moments before I moved to erase our powers. It was Andou. "I'm against this plan! I *don't* think we should erase our powers," he declared.

"Oh? Why?" I asked.

"I mean, c'mon," said Andou, his tone as serious as I'd ever heard from him. "It's not every day you get your hands on crazy cool powers like these, right? Getting rid of them would be a waste."

I was struck dumb. His reasoning was so profoundly childish, I had no words. My exasperation was so deep that it was impossible to express. In that moment, the disappointment and indignation I felt toward Andou Jurai were simply indescribable.

By no means did I *hate* Andou. To the contrary, I would have described my feelings for him as considerably favorable on the whole. My first impression of him had been catastrophically terrible, of course, but over the course of the year since that first meeting, we had grown closer through our club activities, and I now considered him a valuable member of our group. He clashed with the rest of us regularly, yes, but I knew that deep down, he was an earnest boy who cared deeply for his friends. When it really mattered, he somehow found it in himself to be quite reliable.

But it seemed I had overestimated him. His case of chuunibyou really was pathological to such an extent there could be no turning back from it, and I couldn't possibly have been more displeased by the revelation.

And so, from that day forth, the two of us began an extended, heated, and ugly conflict with the fate of our powers at stake.

☆

"A skyscraper? That's when you drag a girl into an airplane bathroom and have your way with her, right?"

"Not even friggin' close!"

It was the day after my birthday. School had come and gone in the way it always did, and I was walking through a residential neighborhood with Sagami by my side. We lived in totally different areas, so we ordinarily wouldn't end up commuting together like this, but the circumstances on this particular day were just a little bit abnormal.

"Oh, huh!" said Sagami after I finished my explanation. "Never even thought about where our word for high-rises came from. Normally, your chuuni trivia's just obnoxious, but I guess there's some interesting info mixed in every once in a while too!"

"'Course, I only just learned this one from Sayumi the other day," I admitted.

"Speaking of whom, what's going on with her today?" asked Sagami.

"Didn't I already explain that? She's stuck at home with a cold."

Sayumi hadn't shown up at school that day. She'd called in sick on account of a cold, and it seemed the cause of said illness was her having pushed herself too far to get my birthday game finished in time. Everyone in the literary club except for me had helped out with the development of *Puzzle & Tales of Dragon Fantasy*, but from what I'd gathered, Sayumi had ended up taking on the vast majority of the work herself. The scripting, the debugging—all of the hard bits, basically—were her contributions.

Tomoyo and Hatoko had filled me in on the details. "Sayumi really put a lot of work into that game," Tomoyo explained. "I guess she thought it was her responsibility since she was the one who came up with the idea?"

"You should go pay her a visit, Juu," Hatoko added. "Be sure not to overstay your welcome, though! Oh, and don't cause any trouble while you're in her house either. Oh, and don't forget..." and so on, and so forth.

Point is that, in the end, it was decided that Sayumi's get-well visit would be my task alone. We figured that a ton of people showing up to her house at once would be a pain to deal with, and, I mean, she *had* only gotten sick because she'd overworked herself finishing *my* present. It just wouldn't have felt right to turn down the task. As for why I was walking with Sagami, nothing especially complicated there—he just happened to live in the same direction as Sayumi's house. Trust me...

"Ah, right! Hey, Andou, I've got a little riddle for you."

"What?"

"How's a jelly doughnut like a girl who just got gangbanged?"

I hesitated. "Dunno. How?"

"They're both red on the inside and white on the outside."

"Clever! But also *horrifying*!"

...I never, *ever* would've chosen to bring a sicko who could only speak in dirty jokes like *him* anywhere even *remotely* near a girl's sickbed otherwise!

"But anyway, she worked so hard making a game that she got sick? I have to say, that's the most Sayumi sort of way I can think of to screw up," said Sagami.

"Can't argue with that," I sighed. "Hey, Sagami? I don't really know much about all this stuff. How hard *is* it to make a game?"

"You're going to have to be more specific. That's way too broad for me to answer. All I can say is it varies."

"Yeah, fair enough." I sighed once more.

"I'm pretty jealous of you, though, Andou! I've never gotten that nice of a present before. All the girls I've dated gave me watches and accessories and useless crap like that."

"Since when were watches and accessories useless? What counts as *useful* in your mind?" I countered.

“Hmm. A fleshlight, I guess?”

“That is *not* what birthday presents are supposed to be useful for!”

“The real problem, of course, is that if my girlfriend or waifu actually gave me a fleshlight as a present, I wouldn’t be able to say for sure if she was expressing her love for me or expressing how much she hated me. Does she really *get* the male mentality? Or is she telling me to literally go screw myself?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that—there *definitely* aren’t many girls out there who’d give a present like *that* in the first place, no matter what the reason behind it.”

“‘Oh, honey, you’re home! Would you like to have dinner? Or take a bath? Or would you rather…rub one out?’”

“I’ll pass on a wife like that, thanks,” I said with a grimace.

“‘Monkey! Where have you put my fleshlight?’ ‘I took the liberty of warming it by my breast for you, Lord Nobunaga!’”

“I’ll pass on a Nobunaga and Hideyoshi like that too, thanks.” As a side note, I’ve heard that the whole thing about Nobunaga calling Hideyoshi a monkey is actually a myth. Supposedly, he *actually* called him a balding rat.

“Oh, come to think of it,” said Sagami with a brilliant smile, carrying on the conversation in spite of the fact that I was obviously fed up with his crap, “I think *Tamaki* might’ve given me a pretty useful present or two, actually.” He said it so casually you’d think it didn’t mean anything to him at all, but *I* fell silent in an instant. “Now *she* was a great girlfriend. She actually *got* my tastes… Hmm? What’s wrong, Andou? Why so quiet?”

“It’s nothing,” I said after a moment of hesitation.

“Wait, did you forget her? You know, Tamaki! My ex-girlfriend?”

“I remember her, yeah.”

“Oh? Okay, then,” said Sagami.

He really didn’t seem to care at all. He didn’t feel the slightest hint of hesitation about bringing Tamaki up in casual conversation, and I felt more than a little conflicted about it. It seemed that he really didn’t think much of anything at all about what had happened back then. What I considered a dark blotch on my record, Sagami apparently thought of as a funny story and nothing more. He swapped girlfriends like most people swap shirts, and in his mind, Tamaki was exactly the same as all the other girls he’d been with.

No…that wasn’t quite right, actually. In Sagami’s eyes, she wasn’t one of the girls he’d been with—she was one of the heroines he’d been briefly fixated on. I could see now that he’d loved Tamaki in the same way he loved the heroines in his favorite anime. He was completely shameless about it too. He’d admit it without hesitation—hell, he’d probably be *proud* to admit it. He turned a blind eye to the things that made her imperfect, refused to accept the things that made her ugly, and only saw what he wanted to see. He only loved the parts of her that were beautiful.

“All right, Andou. My place is off that way,” said Sagami. While I’d been brooding, we’d finally arrived at the point where our paths parted.

“I’m only saying this out of obligation, for the record, but do you wanna come visit her too?” I asked. “Feel free to say no. Actually, please say no. You can go ahead and pass me a get-well gift for her, though. Money works.”

“I’ll pass. Wouldn’t want to catch her cold,” Sagami replied with a tone of perfectly blunt indifference. “I’m not really into Sayumi, anyway. Upperclassman characters just aren’t trendy in this day and age.”

“Riiight. Good for you, I guess. I think Sayumi would probably be glad to learn that a person like you didn’t like her, so actually, that works out pretty nicely,” I replied. Of course, in truth, I had reason to believe that Sayumi had taken a certain degree of interest in Sagami…but on the other hand, said interest was exclusively in the BL shipping sense, so that might not’ve really applied.

“Say hi to her for me, or whatever.”

“Yeah, sure.”

☆

After Andou went out to visit Sayumi, Hatoko and I were left alone in the club room. We didn’t have much of anything to do there, but we also didn’t really feel like going home early, and there was still a chance that Chifuyu might show up at some point, so we were basically just hanging out.

“I made us some tea! Here you go, Tomoyo!”

“Oh, thanks.” I accepted the cup from her and blew on it to cool the tea down a little. It wasn’t every day that we had a calm, quiet afternoon at club like this. Normally, things were a lot more chaotic.

“I wonder if Juu’s going to manage the visit on his own?” murmured Hatoko.

“Eh, he’ll be fine. Not like he’s a kid or anything,” I replied. Hatoko had always been a real worrywart, in a certain sense. She only really got that way where Andou was concerned, I guess. Andou returned the favor in his own way—he always seemed to treat her like a kid and tried to look after her. It was like, I dunno…like they were both trying to play the older sibling for each other, or something.

“Oh, I know!” exclaimed Hatoko, clapping her hands. “Hey, Tomoyo! This seems like the perfect opportunity—there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you!”

“Sure, shoot.”

“What *is* ‘jizz,’ anyway?”

“*Aughbfff*!” I grunted as I spewed my tea all the way across the table. *Again?! We’re seriously dragging out that stupid topic* again*?!*

“I keep asking Juu about it, but he won’t say a peep! He just changes the subject right away, every time!”

No crap he does! If Andou *had* been eager to answer that question for her, I probably would’ve gone out and slugged him. Then again, though, he

was the root of this particular evil, and I really wished he'd do something to put an end to it himself. *He sowed these stupid seeds, so it should be* his *job to reap them! I guess I'm glad the seeds are just figurative...*

"Wait, what the *hell* am I thinking?! No! I am *not* letting my mind get polluted with this lowbrow bullcrap!"

"T-Tomoyo?! A-A-Are you okay?!"

I ended up clutching at my head and writhing in agony as Hatoko did her best to pacify me. *Ugggh, I've been tainted! This is all Andou's fault! I'm giving him the forehead flick of his lifetime tomorrow the second I see him!* "I-I'm fine, Hatoko," I choked out. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, I don't really know what ji...what that word means either."

"Oh, okay," said Hatoko, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as she clapped her hands once more. I had a bad feeling about where this was going. "In that case, let's look it up together!"

Yup, I knew it...

"We can both learn something new today! A new tidbit of wisdom!"

This is one tidbit you'd be better off passing up!

"I bet Mister Google knows what it means!" Hatoko continued, smiling brightly as she stepped closer and reached out for my laptop.

I freaked out, snatched it away from her, and hid it behind my back. "N-No way, nuh-uh! No touchy!" Trust me, Hatoko! The internet might be a spectacular treasure trove of information, but all it takes is a single ill-advised keyword to turn it into Pandora's box!

"Ah! S-Sorry," said Hatoko, immediately deflating.

"N-No, I didn't mean I don't want you touching my stuff! It's not, I mean..." *Agggh, this is the worst!* I didn't even know what I was trying to accomplish anymore. Clearly, though, I was nearing the limit of my ability to hide that forbidden knowledge.

Actually, thinking about this with Hatoko's future in mind, wouldn't it be better if I took the time to explain it to her and clear things up anyway...? If I keep it ambiguous, then there's a real chance that she'll ask some random person what it means out of the blue someday. Isn't it sorta my duty as her friend to make sure she learns what these things are actually all about? B-But...i-it's not like I'm an expert on all that stuff, myself... I spent a moment deeply conflicted, considering the pros and cons of all my options, before I finally settled on a plan of action.

"H-Hatoko!" I shouted as I opened up my laptop, typed the forbidden word into the search bar, and spun it around to face her. "L-L-Let's l-look it up together!" I said, surprising even myself with how many times in a row my voice managed to crack.

"Yeah, okay!" agreed Hatoko with a smile as bright as the sun.

And so, together, we lifted the lid of Pandora's box.

Ten minutes later, a pair of maidens were curled up on the club room's floor, paralyzed with shame at a society that had clearly developed much

too far for its own good. Or perhaps that wasn't quite right. Perhaps we could no longer be called "maidens"... Thanks to my beloved laptop and its all-too-potent ability to unearth information, we had learned one horrifying new fact after another. We were tainted—tainted by the information society we lived within.

"..."

"..."

"Hey...Tomoyo?"

"Yeah...?"

"I'm so, *so* sorry."

"Just forget about it..."

Hatoko had her face buried in her hands. I figured the realization that she'd been shamelessly repeating something that vulgar was too humiliating for her to handle, even if she *hadn't* known what it meant at the time. She was a pretty innocent girl, all things considered, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd somehow corrupted her. I felt just about as guilty as I would've if I'd shown uncensored porn to a little girl who still believed that babies came from cabbage patches or a stork or whatever.

"Look, Hatoko. The things we saw today are our little secret. Got it?"

"Y-Yeah! We'll keep it between us!"

"What's your little secret?" piped up a youthful voice from somewhere behind us. I glanced over my shoulder, only to find Chifuyu standing *right there*.

"*Gaaahhhhhhhhh!*" shrieked Hatoko and I in unison. She'd always had a way of appearing at the most unexpected of moments, but this *really* took the cake. "Ch-Ch-Ch-Chifuyu?!"

"That's me. Chifuyu, in the house."

"Wh-Wh-When did you get here?" I asked.

"Just now," said Chifuyu. In other words, she'd walked in on us while we were curled up in shame—*not* during the bit beforehand.

I let out a sigh of relief. Oh, thank god. She didn't catch us looking at the most obscene crap or reading the most horrifyingly vulgar—

"What's this?" asked Chifuyu, who had just glanced over at the desk where my laptop was sitting, still open and...

Oh.

"Why's that lady all covered in yogu—"

"This is *not* for kids!"

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Hatoko and I shrieked in unison and slammed my laptop shut with superhuman speed. *C-Crap... I left my computer as exposed as the woman in the picture was!* I retreated to a corner of the room at mach speed with my laptop in tow! Then I closed all those tabs, images and text alike! And I cleared my history *and* cookies! *Delete! Delete! Delete! Delete! Delete it all like Mikami Teru deleting people!*

Luckily, Chifuyu didn't decide to pry any deeper into the matter. She lost interest in my computer in general, actually, and started glancing around the room instead. "Where're Andou and Sayumi?" she asked.

"Oh, well," Hatoko began, then gave a quick explanation about what had happened before Chifuyu arrived.

"She has a cold? I'll go visit her too, then," said Chifuyu after the explanation was over.

"You don't have to," replied Hatoko. "Juu's on the way there already, and it's better not to send too many people to visit someone who's sick."

"Oh. Okay..." Chifuyu said, then sank into thought. "Then I'll fold origami cranes. I'll make a thousand of them."

"Oooh, that's a great idea!" said Hatoko. "The old thousand cranes plan! We can wish for Sayumi to get well soon!"

"I'll get paper," Chifuyu said, then made a Gate in the air and warped off to who knows where without missing a beat.

I figured she'd probably gone home to grab origami paper. I also figured that *World Create* would've let her manifest a thousand cranes in the blink of an eye just as easily, but Chifuyu didn't show any inclination to go that route. My best guess was that she realized on some intuitive level that making them wouldn't have any meaning if it didn't take any effort on her part. It felt like she had a surprisingly firm grasp on reality, considering she never seemed to be thinking about it at all—as if all that time she seemed to spend spacing out was just the flip side to her ability to see through to the core of things.

The moment Chifuyu left, Hatoko let out a long, tired sigh. "Th-That was close, Tomoyo."

"You said it," I groaned, walking back to the table with my newly purified laptop in hand. "No way could we ever let Chifuyu get an eyeful of this world's profane underbelly."

"No kidding," said Hatoko with a nod. Then she cocked her head. "Hey, Tomoyo? Just to be sure, 'profane' basically means 'dirty,' right?"

Oh, right. I'd tossed that word out pretty nonchalantly, but on second thought, most people didn't go around dropping the word "profane" into casual conversation. Using needlessly fancy vocabulary like that was, well...let's just say it was something I decided I should work on. "Yeah, that's right. Sorry, I probably could've said that in a less stupid way," I replied.

“No, it’s fine! I just thought that it was the sort of word that Juu uses all the time. He’s always talking about his dark, profane power, and stuff!”

Yup. He sure does. Chuunis just love words like that, and just love using them when they could say something way simpler instead.

“And you know,” Hatoko continued, “there’s something I’ve just never understood. Why does Juu always say bad things about his power?”

“Huh? When does he ever do *that*?” I asked, confused.

“Like when he calls it profane, or accursed! He says stuff like that all the time, right? I *know* that Juu loves his power, so it’s always confused me that he talks so badly about it. Isn’t it strange? It’s like he’s contradicting himself.”

“Oh, *that*. Right—the thing is, it’s not really contradictory in his weird little world. Chuunibyou has a way of making people think that evil, forbidden powers are *cool*, not awful,” I explained.

Sealed powers, forbidden powers, powers that caused some calamity or another way back whenever—chuunis tend to be drawn to that stuff like moths to a flame. They envy fictional characters who get to wield terrible powers that the world at large considers taboo. Even I used to get like that… Yes, *used* to! I’m not like that anymore! Not even a little. Nope.

Anyway, Andou clearly loved his own *Dark and Dark* to pieces, but he probably also thought that treating it like it was some awful, evil power that the masses despised would make it way cooler. He would do his best to act like it was some terribly dangerous force, but he was just so enamored with it that his true feelings always seemed to bubble up to the surface. In the end, he would wind up acting in such a weirdly inconsistent way that it wasn’t totally clear *what* he was going for, just like Hatoko said.

“Hmm, okay!” said Hatoko with an impressed nod. “You’re amazing, Tomoyo! You really do understand everything about Juu!”

“I-I definitely wouldn’t call *that* amazing,” I replied. That sort of praise always made me feel a certain sense of shame, especially about *that* topic. The fact that I could understand that moron’s thought processes and behaviors excruciatingly well almost made it seem like the two of us were in the same boat…

And while I was writhing in humiliated agony, Hatoko muttered to herself.

“It’s not fair.”

She said it so quietly, I could barely hear her. Just a few words, under her breath.

“Huh…?”

“Oh, didn’t we already have some origami paper left over in the club room, Tomoyo?”

“Uh… Y-Yeah, probably. I remember using it for something a while back, so it’s probably still around here somewhere.”

Hatoko stood up to search, and I reflexively stood up as well to help.

What the heck was that…?

☆

Sayumi lived in a big, fancy-looking Japanese-style house in a quiet residential district. A nameplate was attached to a huge, imposing gateway at the front of the property, with “Takanashi” written on it. I half expected to find a Japanese-style garden complete with a koi pond and one of those little bamboo things that fills with water and makes a clacking sound inside...and unsurprisingly, I found nothing of the sort, but the yard *was* impressively large, at least.

“Why is it always *quiet* residential neighborhoods, anyway? When was the last time you heard someone talk about a loud and rowdy residential neighborhood?” I muttered to myself, pondering the most utterly banal questions imaginable as I stepped through the gate, plastic shopping bag in hand. A stone path led up to the front door, where I found a combination doorbell and intercom, which I rang. Before long, I heard footsteps approaching from inside.

“I’ll be right with you,” said a very familiar voice. A moment later, the door slid open. “Yes? How can I help—”

The girl who had arrived to greet me took one look at my face and froze, her eyes widening with shock. She was wearing a surprisingly cute set of pink pajamas, with one of those Japanese-style coats that look sort of like haori over top. Her long black hair was so mussed up that I could tell she’d been in bed just recently, and she had a pair of black-rimmed glasses on as well. Generally speaking, she looked like she’d been having a pretty relaxed day and was dressed for the occasion.

My first thought was “Wait, who?” Then I wondered if Sayumi had an unemployed older sister who she’d never mentioned to us. On closer inspection, though, I finally realized that she was indeed the very girl I’d come here to meet. “Uh…Sayumi?”

“A-Andou…!”

“Hi,” I said with a polite nod. Internally, though, I was still sorta stunned.

In a certain sense, the pajama look was pretty striking on her! Sayumi was the sort of person who always made sure her uniform didn’t have so much as a single wrinkle. One might even say she was a role model for the whole student body when it came to her appearance, so perfect were her grooming habits. Seeing someone like *that* in pajamas, a big, oversized jacket, and a pair of unfashionable glasses was, like…just one heck of a contrast, I guess.

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“Y-You look like you’re feeling okay! Glad to see it,” I said. “M-Man...I’m kinda surprised! Guess you really dress down when you’re at home, huh, Sayu—”

Wham! Before I could even finish my sentence, Sayumi slammed the door shut in my face.

“U-Uhh...? Sayumi?” I called out, a little taken aback.

“I’m not Sayumi,” a slightly panicked voice rang out from inside after a brief pause.

“You’re not... Oh, come *on*, you can’t expect me to believe—”

“I am *not* Sayumi,” said Sayumi. It seemed she was putting her foot down about this.

Hmm. I guess she might be embarrassed about me seeing her dressed down like that? It is the polar opposite of how she usually presents herself. “Okay, so if you’re not Sayumi, who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Sayumi’s twin sister, umm...Maiya,” Sayumi lied. It wasn’t even a little bit convincing. I’d heard that she had a sister, but said sister was four years younger than her—not exactly a twin, to say the least.

All right, what’s my move here? I didn’t buy the twin story for a second, of course, but calling out her blatant lie wouldn’t accomplish anything other than damaging her sense of pride. *All right! I’ll prioritize her self-respect and play along with the lie, then!*

“Oh, okay! Nice to meet you, then. My name’s Andou,” I said. “Sayumi and I see a lot of each other at school.”

“Oh, yes, Andou. My sister’s told me all about you,” said Sayumi.

“Oh? What sorta stuff has she said?”

“According to her, you’re a truly exceptional idiot.”

“...”

Okay, now I’m getting kinda peeved. I go out of my way to play along, and this *is what I get for it?* Just then, Mephisto, my inner demon, poked his head out from my subconscious to whisper, “Wait a minute—this is the perfect chance to get her back for messing with you day in and day out!” into my ear.

Mwa ha ha! Oh, I do *like the sound of that!* Sometimes succumbing to your inner demon’s silver tongue can be nice for a change of pace. “So hey, Maiya, I actually came to pay Sayumi a get-well visit! Where is she right now?”

“My sister is...a-asleep in her room, at the moment.”

“Oh, okay. Mind showing me the way, then?”

“She’s...terribly feverish, and has been crying out in her sleep. I’m afraid she’s in no condition to receive visitors. If you have something important to say to her, I’d be happy to deliver the message in your place.”

“In that case, I have a couple things for you to give her! Mind coming out for a minute so I can pass them to you?”

Sayumi paused again. “I wouldn’t want to infect you with her cold, so I should refrain. You can set down whatever you brought for her, and I’ll collect it after you’re gone.”

Mnh…should’ve known she wouldn’t make it that easy! Sayumi’s mind and mouth were clearly both sharp as a tack, sick or not. Carrying on this silly little back-and-forth bluff fest felt like it’d be a waste of time, so I decided to jump right to the crux of the matter.

“So, yeah. You’re totally Sayumi.”

“I am not. I’m her sister, Maiya.”

“Okay, but you sound literally *exactly* like her.”

“N-No, I don’t,” said Sayumi in a hysterically high-pitched falsetto.

I think you overshot the mark a bit there! Her voice was so high-pitched, I could barely even imagine it coming from a girl as mature as she usually is. Heck, it might’ve been even shriller and cuter than *Chifuyu’s* voice!

“Look, you can put on a forced voice all you want, but it’s still really obvious that—”

“I’m not forcing this voice! I’ve sounded like this since the day I was born!” said Sayumi, her voice audibly cracking under the strain.

“And anyway, even if your voice sounds different, you’re still *talking* exactly like you always do,” I sighed.

“I-I, like, don’t talk like Sayumi at *all*, duuuh!”

Duuuh?!

“Everyone, like, tells me that me and my sister are *totes* nothing like each other! I can’t believe you’d say that! That’s, like, uh…*cray-cray* rude!”

“Cray-cray”?! Oh, jeez, where do we go from here? Sayumi’s grasp of modern slang is so off-base, it hurts! I was lost for words, but then I heard a pained moan from behind the door, and a moment later, it clattered open. A pajama and glasses-clad Sayumi stood behind it, her shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“Andou…I’d prefer if you didn’t tease me quite so mercilessly.”

“I feel like most of that was self-inflicted,” I began, then decided to drop it. “So, you *are* Sayumi, right?”

“Yes, I most certainly am,” Sayumi sighed with a quick nod. Strangely enough, the gesture struck me as cute in a way I rarely saw from her.

Sayumi let me into her house, and we climbed up to her room on the second floor together. As for her room itself, it was, well…normal, I guess? It was a Japanese-style room, without any unnecessary ornamentation whatsoever. There was a desk, a bookshelf, and not much of anything else. Not even so much as a single scrap of trash on her tatami flooring. It was clean and well kept, to be sure, but it didn’t exactly feel super lived in.

“I’ll fetch us some refreshments,” said Sayumi as we stepped inside.

“N-Nah, you don’t have to! I mean, you’re *sick*! You should be resting!” I quickly replied. She was all ready to show me the utmost of hospitality, and I couldn’t let her go to the trouble.

From what I could tell, she was home alone at the moment. It stood to reason that her father, a policeman, would be out at work, and she explained that her sister had just gone out to buy something a moment before. As for her mother…I'd heard that she and Sayumi's father had gotten divorced when Sayumi was young. The huge house she lived in now had been passed down through her father's family.

"Anyway," I said, "you look like you're doing better than I expected!"

"I am, yes," said Sayumi. "I went to the hospital in the morning, then I spent the rest of the day in bed. That seems to have done the trick, and I believe I'll be able to attend school tomorrow. I appreciate the concern."

I hesitated for a moment. "About that…sorry. It sorta feels like it's my fault you got sick."

"There's no need for you to apologize, Andou. If anyone is at fault for my illness, it's me and my lack of self-discipline."

"But, I—"

"—bear no responsibility for *my* decisions. I brought this upon myself," Sayumi insisted. "More to the point, seeing you act so apologetic puts me in an uncomfortable position. Please, don't let it bother you."

"Well…all right."

Sayumi smiled gently at me from across the table. She was kneeling on the ground, her posture perfect, and she didn't look sickly at all. From what I could tell, she wasn't trying to spare my feelings—she really *did* seem to feel more or less all better.

A moment later, though, she glanced awkwardly away from me. "I-I'd prefer if you didn't stare at me like that," Sayumi bashfully muttered.

"S-Sorry! I never really get to see you like this, so it sorta just happened," I explained. "It's like, 'Wow, so *this* is what Sayumi's like when she's at home,' y'know? I sorta always assumed you'd wear Japanese clothes around the house, or a martial arts uniform, or whatever. I'm a little surprised."

"Just what sort of person do you think I am?" Sayumi sighed.

"Plus, your pajamas are pretty, I dunno, cutesy, I guess?"

"N-No, these aren't mine!" shouted Sayumi. This time, she wasn't even pretending not to panic. "These are my sister's! *My* pajamas were sweaty, so I had to wash them… I didn't have another pair, so my only choice was to borrow hers… I prefer more simple nightwear, myself…"

"Oh, there you go, putting on a front again!"

"Believe me."

She had such an incredibly intense look in her eyes that I found myself nodding and shouting, "Right, I believe you!" without skipping a beat. *Hey, cut me some slack! She's scary!*

"The same is true of the glasses," Sayumi continued. "I, um, only wear them around the house, I suppose. I didn't spare any thought to appearances when I chose their design, so…I'd prefer not to be seen wearing them…"

It seemed Sayumi was one of those people who made a point of only wearing glasses when she was at home. “Y’know, I’ve never seen you in glasses before, but, well…they really suit you, Sayumi,” I noted. *Something about it has, like…a sorta gap moé appeal, I guess?* I didn’t have a thing for glasses or anything, but in Sayumi’s case, they gave her an intellectual vibe that matched her look really nicely.

“Spare me the flattery,” Sayumi snapped.

I really wasn’t flattering her, though! “Oh, right! I brought a buncha stuff for you,” I said. “Y’know, get-well presents and all.”

“Get-well presents…? You’re being overdramatic about this,” Sayumi sighed, but I was already reaching into my bag.

“You gotta eat fruit when you have a cold, right? So I was planning on getting you some oranges or apples, but then the nearest supermarket didn’t have any in stock, so I picked this up instead,” I said, setting the fruit I’d bought for Sayumi down on the table—a single plump, black avocado.

“…”

“Huh? Something wrong, Sayumi? I dunno what *that* face is supposed to mean.”

“Andou? What is this black…*thing*?”

“It’s an avocado! They call them natural butter, y’know?”

“Actual butter is *already* natural. You mean ‘nature’s butter.’”

“Anyway, I read that they’ve been really popular with girls lately!”

“That’s…valid, I’ll admit, but regardless, the fact that you thought a fruit this rich and savory would be appropriate to feed to a sick person makes me seriously question your sense of reason.”

Okay, so the avocado was a miss. Too bad. “I got you this too! I thought, hey, it’s important to keep your throat in good shape when you’re sick, right?” I produced the next item from my bag, a package of cough-drop-flavored potato chips.

“*Please*, just buy normal cough drops next time.”

“I thought plain ol’ cough drops would just lack a certain fun factor, y’know?”

“You need to learn to prioritize the *flavor* factor over the fun factor. This *has* to be a practical joke on the manufacturer’s part! Why would you *buy* this?”

“Oh, right! I bought some ice cream too.”

“That, at least, I’ll give you credit for. Having a cold always gives me the strangest urge to eat ice cream.”

“Yeah, it was great.”

“You ate it yourself?! What about mine?!”

“Huh? There isn’t any.”

“Why not?! Why would you eat all of it on your own?!”

“Wait, back up. I kinda shifted topics there. I was just telling you about a thing I bought for myself on the way here, that’s all.”

“That…was an *incredibly* misleading segue.”

“So anyway, the type I bought was one of those ones where sometimes there’s a little mark on the stick that means you win another one for free, right? And guess what? I won! That’s, like, as rare as seeing a shooting star, so I made a wish on it for you to feel better soon!”

“He he he! Well, thank you oh so *very* much!” said Sayumi with an extremely insincere smile.

“What else…? Oh, right, I got you this too!” The object in question being a bottle of avocado juice.

“Why are you so dead set on forcing avocados down my throat?” asked Sayumi.

“Well, I heard that they’ve been really popular with girls—”

“I heard that excuse the first time you used it, yes.”

I sighed. “That one’s no good either, huh? I had a feeling you’d have a really refined palate, considering your upbringing and all, and I was a little worried they wouldn’t have anything interesting enough to satisfy you. I ran myself ragged trying to find something that’d really surprise you, but it looks like my bad feeling was right in the end…”

“Andou. Please. *Try* to appreciate the fact that if your goal was to please me, you have strayed *far* from that objective.”

I guess my get-well visit was kind of a bust on the whole, then? What a terrible shame. Apparently, my effort to appeal to her by way of novelty had been misguided.

Then, suddenly, I heard a bright and cheerful voice shout “I’m hooome!” from the entryway. The thudding of footsteps dashing up the staircase followed, and soon, the door clicked open. “Hey, Sayu! I picked up your Pocari! You wanted the powdered kind, right?” said a lively-looking girl as she stepped into the room.

Her hair was fairly short—just long enough to skim her shoulders—and her eyes were big and vibrant. Her face still had a touch of youthfulness to its features, but it looked like she was wearing just a little makeup that gave her a certain mature vibe as well. Her clothing, meanwhile, was a sailor uniform that I assumed came from some nearby middle school.

“I got you some ice cream too! It’s in the freezer—” Suddenly, the girl’s eyes met mine and she froze in place.

The silence felt really awkward, so I decided to greet her with a casual “H-Hey, sorry to intrude.” The girl, however, ignored me entirely, took a deep breath, then shouted at the top of her lungs.

“S-S-Sayu brought a *guy* hooome!”

“M-Maiya! What on earth are you saying?!” snapped Sayumi.

“Wowee, Sayu! I might’ve been underestimating you!” said this new girl—Maiya, it seemed. “Guess high schoolers really *do* know how to get stuff done!”

“You’re misinterpreting this. Listen to me for just a—”

“Ah! Wait, am I third-wheeling you guys right now? Ha ha ha, whoops! My bad! I’ll be downstairs, so take your time and don’t mind me! I’ll turn

the TV up nice and loud too, so I won't hear anything, no matter *what* you guys do up here!"

"*Maiya*!" snapped Sayumi, her face flushing red as she put on one of the most intimidating scowls I'd ever seen from her. Maiya just shrugged and stuck out her tongue while Sayumi sighed. "Why must you be so incessantly childish? Was it really necessary to embarrass the both of us in front of my guest?"

"Oh, quit acting like you're my mom!" said Maiya. "You'd better be careful, Sayu. Keep scowling like that, and you'll get more wrinkles and look even older than ever, you know?"

"I will *not* get wrinkles, and I do *not* look old!" shouted Sayumi. Somehow, she looked even more upset than ever. Like, seriously, the face she was making was downright horrifying. At around that time, however, she seemed to remember that I'd been watching their exchange and turned to me. "I'm terribly sorry about this, Andou," Sayumi said with a quick, apologetic bow. "It's inexcusable for my family to be this rude to you."

"Nah, it's fine! Doesn't bother me at all," I replied. "So, I'm guessing she's your sister?"

"Yes, that's correct. As you've surmised, this is Takanashi Maiya, my handful of a little sister."

"C'mon, Sayu, don't call me a handful! You're supposed to call me your *darling* little sister, right?" said Maiya with a cute little smile.

Wow, so this *is Sayumi's little sister? She's...how to put it...absolutely nothing like Sayumi at all, huh?* Sayumi had always felt like the living embodiment of the sort of womanly strength and modesty that was so highly prized by traditional Japanese standards, while Maiya, in contrast, felt just about as "modern teen" as a girl could be.

"Nice to meetcha! My name's Takanashi Maiya, and I'm fourteen! Who're you? Do you go to school with Sayu?" asked Maiya. I assumed she'd figured that out from the uniform I was wearing.

"This boy's name is Andou Jurai," explained Sayumi, beating me to the punch before I could answer. "He's an underclassman in the literary club, and he came to visit me on behalf of all our clubmates today."

"Ooh, that makes sense! Thanks for coming, Andou!" said Maiya.

"Y-Yeah, no problem," I replied.

©029

“Oh!” said Maiya, as if she’d just remembered something. “Hey, would you mind giving me your contact info?”

She comes on pretty strong right off the bat, doesn’t she? She was so friendly and cheerful, it almost seemed excessive. I’d never been very good at dealing with super cutesy, hyper enthusiastic kids like her. It’s not that I *disliked* that sort of person, to be clear—it’s just that I didn’t know how I was supposed to interact with them.

In any case, I did exchange contact info with her in the end. The moment we finished, she hopped up to her feet, said “Oh, right! Wait here just a minute!” and charged out of Sayumi’s room, only to return moments later with a big book in her hands. “Ta-da! Lookie lookie, it’s Sayu’s middle school yearbook! You can’t go over to your girlfriend’s house without snooping through her yearbook, right?!”

“*Please* don’t bring out my belongings without my permission, Maiya,” sighed Sayumi. “And more to the point, Andou and I are *not* dating.”

“Not dating *yet*?”

“Not dating *in perpetuity*,” Sayumi declared decisively. Which kinda stung, not gonna lie.

“Ooh? Methinks the lady doth protest too much!” said Maiya.

Sayumi just sighed and rested her head in her hand. “Maiya. Please, go to your room and leave us alone.”

“You wanna be *alone* with Andou, huh?”

“Fine. If that’s how you’re determined to read it, then go right ahead. Just do it somewhere else,” said Sayumi. “Talking with you makes me feel like my cold is going to relapse.”

“Okaaay,” droned Maiya. “All right, I’m off, Andou! Feel free to linger!” And with that, she was gone. She’d come in like a storm and departed just as quickly.

“So, that’s your sister, huh?” I asked once she was gone.

“Ashamed as I am to admit it, yes,” replied Sayumi with a shake of her head.

“You two *really* don’t take after each other much, huh?”

“Yes, I’m told that quite often…”

It wasn’t every day that I got to see Sayumi look *that* worn out. I had to wonder if Maiya was her perfect superhuman of a sister’s one and only natural enemy. As astonishingly capable as Sayumi was, it seemed that not even she could stand up to the unstoppable force that was her family’s youngest child.

“She isn’t a bad person by any means, but she can be ever so slightly uninhibited and impolite,” said Sayumi, glancing over at a framed photo on the other side of the room. The picture was of an elderly old woman with an expression so stern, she gave off a sort of scary impression. “I sometimes have to wonder what my grandmother would think about having a girl like her as a granddaughter, if she were still alive.”

“Your grandmother…?” I muttered. “Oh, right—she’s the one who trained you to be cross-dominant, wasn’t she?”

“I’m…*deeply* distressed that that’s how you’ve wound up remembering her, but yes, that’s correct,” said Sayumi before letting out a quick sigh. There was a sort of faraway look in her eyes. “She was a stern, fastidious woman who held others to the same strict standards she held for herself. I can’t even begin to guess how many times she scolded me for one thing or another.”

“*You* got scolded, Sayumi? I can’t even imagine that.”

Sayumi chuckled. “‘Become a person who is worthy of praise.’ She would tell me that over and over again.”

“A person worthy of praise…” I repeated. If I’d been asked who the most praiseworthy person I knew was, I would’ve most likely said Sayumi’s name without sparing the question a second thought. Her actions were irreproachable, and her integrity was unquestionable. She was remarkable across the board, really. She could be ever so slightly mean-spirited sometimes, sure, but all things considered, she was as praiseworthy as a person could get.

“I’m sure your grandmother’s watching over you from heaven, and I’m sure she’s proud of you. It looks to me like you turned out exactly the way she’d want her granddaughter to become,” I said.

I honestly believed what I was saying, and I didn’t mean to make a big thing out of it, but to my surprise, a shadow fell over Sayumi’s face. “I’d like to think you’re right about that,” she said with an ever so slightly pained smile.

At that point, I reached for the yearbook that Maiya had left in the room. “Mind if I take a look at this?” I asked.

“Feel free,” said Sayumi, “but I doubt you’ll find anything especially entertaining in it.”

I slid the yearbook out from the rather stately case it came in and laid it down. Sayumi and I chatted idly as I flipped through it and enjoyed the chance to see some older pictures of her.

“You really haven’t changed at all since then, have you?” I noted.

“I suppose not,” said Sayumi. “My height and weight have both barely changed since I was a middle schooler.”

“It’s weird, though. You still look *older* some— Uh, I mean, never mind.”

Just then, my gaze fell on a particular picture. It was of a student council gathering, from what I could tell, featuring a few students and their faculty advisor. In the very center stood Sayumi, a pleasant but stern smile on her face.

“You were on the student council in middle school, Sayumi?” I asked.

“I was, yes,” she replied.

That was a bit of a surprise, but more than that, it just made sense somehow. Being on the student council felt *right* for her. I’d even heard that

Kudou asked Sayumi for help with her student council president duties every once in a while these days.

“Yeah, that makes sense. You seem like you’d make a great student council president. Oh, right! Speaking of,” I began. I’d always wondered something about Sayumi, deep down, and this seemed like the right moment to go ahead and ask.

“Why didn’t you join the student council in high school?”

Instantly, Sayumi’s expression shifted. It took on an almost imperceptibly grim shade, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly, and a moment later, she looked away without saying a word. Seconds passed in excruciating silence.

“U-Umm, Sayumi...?”

“My apologies, Andou. I believe it’s about time for you to leave, if you’d be so kind.”

“Huh...?”

“I took some medicine just a moment ago, and it’s starting to make me a little sleepy. I’d like to lie down.”

“Oh... R-Right, got it. Okay, then.”

She’d done her best to soften the blow, but she’d made it very clear that she had no intention of answering my question. I left her room so quickly it felt like I was running away—or maybe it was more like she was driving me out and barring the door behind me. Then I climbed down the stairs, said a quick goodbye to Maiya—who was sprawled out on the floor watching TV—and left the Takanashi household behind me.

CHARACTER FILE 10

C'mon, Sayu, don't call me a handful! You're supposed to call me your darling little sister, right?

Takanashi Maiya
Onaga First Middle School, second year, class 4
Blood type: A

Sayumi's little sister. A perfectly prototypical modern middle schooler.

In a certain sense, **she acts as a trump card** that can overcome Sayumi, the strongest character in the roster...probably.

The sisters' personalities couldn't possibly be any more different, but in terms of facial features, there's quite the family resemblance. Which, by extension, implies that if Sayumi let herself act all hip and hyper like her sister, she might actually be surprisingly cu-

That's none of your business.

Excerpt from the *Bloody Vivre*

Chapter 6: A Duel, Though Otherwise, an Infraction

Route of Origin: the power to return any physical entity to the way it was meant to be. Andou was the one who first chose to describe my power in those terms. It was a very positive and rather optimistic way of perceiving its capabilities—unsurprising, considering that's simply the sort of person Andou was.

If I were to describe my power in my *own* terms, though, I would call it something different. I would call it the power to reject that which was *not* how it was meant to be—the power to impose my own subjective viewpoint upon others and remake them in the image *I* thought was right.

It was, indeed, a power fueled by pure arrogance. An unsightly power, one perfectly suited for an inexperienced and immature girl like me.

After Andou and I had our disagreement, the literary club was split into two factions: those who thought we should eliminate our powers, and those who thought we should keep them. Or so I say, but in truth, the majority of the conflict took the form of Andou and I arguing incessantly. The other three more or less stood by and watched over us as our debates grew more and more heated with each passing day.

That said, if I had to say which of our positions the three of them seemed more inclined to support, I would theorize that they were on my side. In short, what I've been characterizing as a long-term argument could just as easily have been described as the four of us trying to convince Andou to see our point of view. Trying and failing, unfortunately—no matter how we tried to make him see reason, Andou clung to his perspective with stubborn tenacity. Finally, our conflict escalated from verbal to physical. Our commonplace lives of conversation in the clubroom shifted into a supernatural battle fought with extraordinary powers.

"I would like to give you one last chance to apologize and concede the argument, Andou," I threateningly stated.

"That's my line, Sayumi," replied Andou.

We squared off against each other out behind the school's gymnasium, where we were unlikely to be interrupted by any passersby. Frankly, I can't say for sure who was responsible for this particular escalation. Words were exchanged, inflammatory provocations were flung, and before we knew it, we'd somehow reached an agreement: we would fight, and the winner's opinion would be declared correct.

"Mwa ha ha! Now *this* is more like it! I've always preferred to keep these things nice and simple. We'll bring an end to this debate with our fists!" muttered Andou. Then he started shadowboxing, making little "Fwsh, fwsh"

noises with his mouth to make the strikes seem more impressive. I'm afraid to say they needed the help.

"Andou?"

"Yeah? What, did you take one look at my practice punches and chicken out?"

"Your stance is backward. Generally speaking, right-handed boxers stand with their left side forward."

"Wha—?! W-Well, it's *my* fighting style, and *I* stand like this!" sputtered Andou as his face flushed bright red.

Ugh. This is draining my motivation to go through with this.

"This is a really bad idea, Juu! Let's call it off, okay?" said Hatoko from the sidelines, her concern readily apparent. She, Tomoyo, and Chifuyu were all present, of course. This showdown would determine the future course of the whole literary club, so it wouldn't do for any of them to be absent. "You *know* you don't stand a chance against Sayumi!" Hatoko insisted.

"Mwa ha ha! Don't you worry, Hatoko," said Andou. "You don't think a man like me would take on a foe as mighty as her without a plan, do you? I stayed up all night figuring out—"

"A way to beat her?" Hatoko guessed hopefully.

"—the names of all the special attacks I'll be using today!" concluded Andou.

"So…you're doomed…" Hatoko moaned.

"And thanks to that all-nighter," Andou began, "…I feel pretty sick, actually…"

"You're really, *really* doomed!"

Their conversation was making it very clear that neither of them were taking this especially seriously, and I decided to step in and bring it to a close. "Let's go over the rules before we begin," I said. "There will be no time limit. The use of weapons of all varieties is banned. Our arena is the area behind the gymnasium, and nowhere else. Finally, a victor will be declared when one combatant gives up."

"And *finally* finally, any and all use of our powers is permitted," added Andou in a tone that told me he wasn't about to accept any protest on that front.

"The other three would be one thing, but banning or permitting *our* powers hardly makes a difference in this sort of contest," I noted.

"Oh, but it does," said Andou. "It turns this from an ordinary battle into a *supernatural* battle! That's a totally different genre!"

I sighed with exasperation. "Tomoyo? Please give us the sign to begin." We'd asked Tomoyo to serve as our referee. The conclusion to our match was hopelessly forgone, and I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"Okay, here goes," Tomoyo said, then glanced over at my foe. "Hey, Andou? Be sure to give up before you get *really* badly hurt." At long last, she raised a hand overhead and brought it down as she shouted, "Begin!"

Our duel was a go. Andou made the first move, raising his right arm before him. “I am he who conquers chaos,” he chanted, eyes closed as if he were praying.

I recalled him calling that little spell of his the “Malediction of Unleashing.” Andou couldn’t use his power without making a big show of reciting his chant first…or rather, that was the unimaginably idiotic story he’d dreamed up for himself. Generally speaking, though, he *did* stick to reciting it before he brought out his black flames. Except for when he forgot. Which was often.

In any case, it seemed that he had yet to completely settle on his chant’s phrasing. Every time he said it, the particulars of the wording shifted. Still, Andou kept chanting away with remarkable enthusiasm, while I, on the other hand, took the chance to close the gap between us. Needless to say, I had no intention of allowing him to finish.

“You really closed your eyes in the middle of a fight? Are you genuinely that stupid?” I asked.

“C-Crap!” Andou shouted.

I see, then. He really is *that stupid after all.* I grabbed his collar with my right hand, took hold of his wrist with my left, and stepped in to throw him off-balance. Then, the moment his weight had shifted onto one of his legs, I swept it out from beneath him. In judo terms, I’d executed a sweeping leg throw.

“Gaaaaaah!” Andou wailed as he slammed into the ground, back-first. My technique couldn’t have possibly landed more cleanly. He was weak. Pathetically so.

“If this were a judo match, I would have just won decisively,” I noted.

“Mngaaah,” Andou moaned. “Ow… *Ooow*…”

“I take it you understand now, Andou? You have absolutely no hope of—”

“Oh god, I scraped my elbow! I’m bleeding! I’m *bleediiing*!”

I rolled my eyes. Andou wasn’t listening—he was too busy rolling around in agony. Loud, *obnoxious* agony, and though it was barely a scrape, I *did* feel somewhat guilty for making him bleed, so I decided in spite of myself to use *Route of Origin* to mend his wounds. I took a step forward.

“Gotcha!” shouted Andou, his grimace of pain shifting into a triumphant grin in the blink of an eye as he leapt to his feet. “Know this—you’ve lost because you were arrogant enough to think to heal your enemy’s wounds!”

It was a fake-out. A trap. His unseemly squealing was all a ploy to lure me closer to him, and I’d fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Deception is hardly praiseworthy, but I must admit that I was just as unimpressed with myself for having been deceived. However, there was just one flaw to his stratagem.

“You’re so *slow*,” I sighed. Andou had tried to grab hold of me, but his movements were so sluggish that I had all the time in the world to prepare for him. And so, as Andou stepped forward, I kicked his leg right out from under him. Another judo technique—in this case, a plain foot sweep. And,

with the leg he'd been trying to place his weight on suddenly in the air, Andou once again lost balance and collapsed to the ground with a shriek.

"Give up, Andou. There's no point in dragging this out," I said.

"No way..." Andou groaned. "It's too early for you to declare victory! I still have a trump card up my sleeve!"

"Whatever that trump card may be, it doesn't change the fact that you won't punch me, no matter what happens. Or will you?" I replied.

Andou's breath caught, and he fell silent. It hadn't escaped my notice that he'd tried to *grab* me during his little sneak attack, *not* punch me. That was the better part of why it had been so easy to counter him. The difference in our abilities was only *one* of the reasons he could never defeat me—the larger factor was the simple fact that, apparently, Andou Jurai could not bring himself to hit a girl.

"I won't tell you to discard all thoughts of chivalry and come at me with everything you have," I said. "Showing a degree of care for women in that respect is by no means a bad thing. In fact, I happen to appreciate that gentlemanly side of yours. That being said, if you're incapable of attacking me, then there's no point in carrying on this contest any longer. You have no hope for victory. Admit defeat now and spare us both the trouble."

Andou didn't say a word. He simply heaved himself to his feet, and thrust out his arm again, taking up the same pose he'd been in moments earlier.

"I am he who conquers chaos!" Andou chanted once more. I was speechless. It seemed our duel was to continue after all, so I charged forward, once again closing the gap and flinging him to the ground before he could finish his invocation.

I still didn't understand at that point. I had yet to catch on to his *true* objective in the slightest.

☆

The day after my get-well visit, Sayumi didn't show up at the literary club. It wasn't an unexcused absence, to be fair—she'd sent a text saying "I'll be absent from club today" to all of our members (except for Chifuyu, who didn't have a cell phone). Attendance wasn't mandatory in our club to begin with, so it wasn't like one of us being absent was particularly rare, but for some reason, I couldn't help but assume that what happened between the two of us yesterday was the reason behind her missing the meeting. It felt like she was avoiding me.

"Aw. Sayumi's not coming again today?" Chifuyu asked with a sad little frown. "I worked so hard to make this too," she added, pulling something from her pocket and setting it down on the table.

According to the others, after I left for Sayumi's house, the three of them had decided to fold a thousand paper cranes together. I took a look at Chifuyu's item to find that it was...a piece of origami paper that had been folded twice, turning it into a triangle.

"Uh... Huh? What is this? A slice of pizza?" I asked.

“It’s a baby crane,” Chifuyu proudly declared.

“Oh. Since it’s, like, the first steps to fold a paper crane?”

“Right.”

“You didn’t want to finish it?”

“I got bored.”

“*That* sure didn’t take long! This is seriously the *very* start of the process! You folded it *twice*!”

“The first step is always the most important one.”

“You’re only supposed to say that about something that’s already finished, and only if turned out well!”

“The step you get bored on is always the most important one.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll admit, folding cranes *does* get a lot harder after this part.” I wasn’t very confident that I could successfully fold a paper crane without looking up a tutorial or something, so I couldn’t really blame her too harshly.

“Chifuyu was really excited at first, but she dropped out before I knew it,” said Hatoko, who was sitting off to the side.

“Folding a thousand cranes is, like, so *innocent* and *pure* and stuff, so we decided we’d help her. Boy, was *that* ever a mistake,” added Tomoyo.

“Do you think Sayumi will like it?” asked Chifuyu.

“You mean you’re actually planning on giving this to her…?” I said. “I hate to say this when you’re all excited and everything, but I’m pretty sure even Sayumi would have a hard time forcing a smile if she got a present like this.”

“What do you think she’d give me as a thank-you?”

“You’d expect her to return the favor for *this*? And wait, you’d only give it to her ’cause you wanted something in exchange?! How greedy *are* you?!”

“When it comes to these things, it’s the thought that matters.”

“You’re only allowed to say that if you’re the one *getting* the gift! Saying it when you’re the giver makes the whole thing feel totally insincere!”

In the end, I wasn’t able to convince Chifuyu that giving Sayumi her masterpiece, the baby crane, was a bad idea. Not gonna lie, though, I was sorta looking forward to seeing Sayumi’s reaction whenever that ended up happening.

“What’s going on with Sayumi, anyway? If she’s feeling better, then why wouldn’t she show up today?” Tomoyo asked, then turned to look at me. “Hey, Andou, how did Sayumi look yesterday?”

“She seemed pretty much fine to me,” I replied. “We had a whole conversation and everything. But, well…”

“But what?”

“Ah, nothing. Forget about it.”

Sayumi’s expression just before I left had suddenly flashed through my mind. It was an expression steeped in a shadow of regret—or frustration, maybe? Thinking back on it made me feel a weird sort of pressure in my chest. It was one of those vague feelings of discomfort that I just couldn’t

pin down, but before I had the time to start really brooding on it, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I checked to see who was calling me, then stepped over to the corner of the club room to pick up.

"Ah, Andou? Heyo, it's me!"

"Maiya, right?" I replied.

"Yup, yup! Short time, no see!"

Sayumi's sister had called me, much to my surprise. I'd given her my contact info the day before, sure, but I certainly hadn't been expecting her to use it so soon.

"Do you need something?" I asked.

"No, but you might! You forgot your student handbook at our house yesterday. I found it lying in the entryway."

Huh? I checked the breast pocket I always kept my student handbook in, and lo and behold, it was missing. I really had forgotten it at her house, and I'd somehow managed to not notice over the course of a full day.

"I just noticed it myself, actually!" Maiya continued. "Too bad—if I'd found it this morning, I could've given it to my sister to pass off to you... So, what do you think? Should I give it to her when I can, or what?"

"Ah, yeah, that'd be great. Thanks."

"Roger that!"

"Oh, right. Hey, Maiya?" I began. This seemed like a good opportunity to clear up the doubts that had been weighing on me. "How was Sayumi acting after I went home yesterday?"

"Huh...? Just like usual, basically. Her cold was pretty much gone, so she ate dinner like normal. I guess she went to bed early to be on the safe side, but she was all healthy again this morning."

"Huh. Okay..."

"Why, did something happen?" Maiya asked, then paused. "Ah! Don't tell me—did things get *spicy* between the two of you after I left? Squee!"

Ha ha ha! Welp! Sayumi's sister really is sort of a pain in the rear, isn't she?! "Nah, nothing like that," I replied. "It's just...I think I touched on a sore subject with her or something, I guess."

"Ooh, I get it now. Sayu *is* pretty sensitive about a buncha stuff. Like, she's all *straitlaced* about so many things, y'know? Anyway, got any clues about what set her off?"

"I wish I did," I sighed. "We were looking at the yearbook you brought in, and I said something about how I hadn't known she was on the student council."

"The student council...?" Maiya repeated. Something about her tone sounded distinctly different all of a sudden, and I decided to dig deeper.

"What? Does that ring any bells?"

"Umm... Ah, gee, I dunno. Should I even talk about this? Sayu *did* tell me not to spread it around too much...but she didn't say to *never* spread it around, so it's probably fine, right? Yup, that's definitely how she phrased it! Okay! I'm gonna just say that makes this fine! Listen up, Andou!"

“I really don’t think I should after that little speech!” I think Maiya might be a little too free-spirited sometimes! Doesn’t she care about her big sister’s privacy?!

“Seriously, it’s probably fine! I have faith in you, Andou,” said Maiya. Which was nice to hear and all, but considering we’d only just met the night before, I couldn’t help but think it came across as a little insincere.

I knew that the right thing to do was probably putting my foot down and refusing to listen. Unfortunately, though, I couldn’t resist the tempting allure of sating my own curiosity, and I didn’t stop her from telling me. I was just too invested in figuring out what had caused Sayumi to make that face.

When Sayumi was in middle school, she was apparently as ideal of a student council president as you could possibly hope for. Her conduct was exemplary, and her grades were exceptional. It wouldn’t even be much of a stretch to call her perfect.

No matter how unreasonable the task set before her, she would solve it in a flash, proving to everyone around her how much she’d earned her position. The way she worked herself to the bone for the sake of her peers’ school experience didn’t escape her teachers’ notice either. They trusted her implicitly and held her up as the epitome of a model student. She was as perfect and praiseworthy as could be.

“And that’s why she had a liiittle bit of trouble with the other StuCo members, see,” Maiya explained.

It was a pretty straightforward story: Sayumi expected the same sort of perfection that she was capable of from the people around her. She believed that the other members of the council were capable of overcoming the same hurdles she could, and she did her best to convince them to try to do so.

“I guess the other members were sorta part of the problem too. Most of them only joined ’cause they thought it’d look good on their records, and they weren’t really interested in putting the work in…but like, c’mon, Sayu’s gotta be the only girl out there who’d take a *middle school’s* student council *that* seriously.”

I *wanted* to side with Sayumi at that point, honestly...but I had to admit that, from an objective perspective, both sides of the story were probably in the wrong. I also hadn’t been there and had nothing to do with any of what had happened, of course, so it wasn’t really my place to judge to begin with.

“Sayu can just be so *stubborn*, y’know? She’s *really* not the compromising type. And I know she doesn’t mean it this way, but sometimes when she’s *so* perfect at her job, it starts to feel like she’s making fun of you for not doing better yourself. That’d just make the other members more upset with her, but of course, that wouldn’t matter to *her* at all…”

I’m sure Sayumi was irritated. After all, her fellow council members were totally uninterested in giving their jobs their all—totally unwilling to buckle down and get their work done. From *their* perspective, though,

Sayumi was probably a meddler who couldn't read the room and was breaking down their social circle as a result. She pursued perfection, and that left everyone around her in the dust in the process.

Still, in spite of how uncomfortable the atmosphere in the student council must have been for her, Sayumi didn't so much as consider shirking her responsibilities. She stuck it out, doing as perfect a job as ever until her term as the president came to an end.

"Kinda incredible, isn't it? If *I'd* been in that situation, I'm sure I would've ended up running to the teachers in tears and begging them to let me quit! 'Course, I'd also never join the student council in the first place," added Maiya. "But yeah, even Sayu got a bit depressed before it was over. The thing is, after she thought it all through and tried to figure out what went wrong, she ended up deciding that 'the cause of the friction between me and the other members was my inability to effectively communicate my intentions to them. Clearly, I still lacked the experience to serve as the president of an organization.' Like, *c'mon*, girl, what corporation are you making an apology speech to?"

I had to agree with that one. Sayumi really was so serious about these things, it was a problem.

"Sayu's a pretty positive person on the whole, y'know? Like, she regrets stuff, sure, and she thinks about her mistakes, but she only does it 'cause she thinks it'll help her not screw up in the same way next time. She figured that even though it hadn't worked out in middle school, that would just help her do better in her high school's council."

At that point, I just had to jump in and ask a question. "Huh? Wait, you mean Sayumi said she wanted to be on the student council again in high school?"

"Yup. She talked about it before she started at your school. Said she was gonna try to be the president."

"But..."

"I know, right...? I'm her sister, and even *I* don't get it. It's like she just changed her mind for no reason. It's not that she lost the election either—I heard she didn't even *try* to run!"

The more I heard, the less I understood. Why hadn't Sayumi ended up as the student council president? I knew that I was in no position to admit this, but I couldn't deny that a job like that would've been a *way* more valuable use of her time than working as the president of a do-nothing group like the literary club.

We said our goodbyes, and as I walked back over to the table, Tomoyo looked up at me. "Who was it?" she asked.

"Sayumi's little sister," I replied.

Tomoyo gave me a look. "You swapped contact info with Sayumi's little sis?"

"S-So what? Who cares?" I countered, flinching away from her gaze. "Anyway, remind me, Tomoyo, where's the student council room, again?"

“The council room? On the fifth floor. Why’re you going *there*, though?”

“To see Kudou. I’ll be right back.”

The student council room was, well, perfectly normal, actually. There were a few bookcases with documents and stuff filed away in them, and there was a big, long table in the center of the room. Kudou was the only one inside, and she was sitting in the chair farthest away from the door—the president’s reserved seat, I imagined.

“I-It’s been a while, Andou,” said Kudou as I walked in.

“Yeah, I guess,” I replied.

“Umm… W-Well, come in, then! Have a seat.”

With our awkward greeting out of the way, I took a seat in front of her. I hadn’t done anything wrong, but the atmosphere still felt really uncomfortable between us. I’d sent her a text in advance, and she’d replied that she was alone today so I could come talk with her, but, like…I just couldn’t quite figure out how I was supposed to act around her, I guess.

Some pretty strange circumstances had led to us kinda sorta dating for a brief period, and it had *seemed* like she’d forgiven me for all of that weirdness, but ever since then, I hadn’t been able to figure out what we were to each other. Like, were we friends, or what? I would’ve been totally fine with that, to be clear, but if I was reading the situation wrong, then having an underclassman like me act all friendly all of a sudden would’ve probably been really obnoxious in Kudou’s eyes. *Man. How do I deal with this?*

“Umm, Kudou?” I eventually said. In the end, I decided that just coming straight out and asking would be the best way to handle the situation. “Please be honest—what do you think about me?”

Kudou paused for a moment, eyes wide…

“Huuuuuuh?!”

…then she flinched backward so dramatically, she just about tumbled right off her chair. “Wh-Wh…Where the hell did *that* come from?! Wh-What do I think about you…? That’s what *I* want to ask *you*… Wait, no! Wh-What are you after?! My money?! My good name?!”

“C-Calm down, Kudou!”

“I-I don’t think *anything* about you at all, for your information!”

“Oh, really…? I mean, that works, I guess.”

“Ah,” said Kudou, pausing once more. “I-I mean, umm…right. It’s not that I don’t have *any* feelings about you whatsoever… If I had to say one way or the other, I’d say that I’m not entirely disinterested…and I’m not angry about what happened between us before at all anymore… So, umm,” Kudou muttered incoherently, pointedly refusing to make eye contact. “I d-don’t *hate* you…”

I let out a sigh of relief. That’s good to hear. As long as she doesn’t straight-up hate me, I think I can deal with this.

“A-Anyway, what are you here for, Andou?” asked Kudou.

“I came to ask you about Sayumi, actually,” I replied.

Kudou blinked. “About Takanashi…?”

“So, you want to know why Takanashi didn’t become the student council president, huh?” said Kudou, her eyes cast down in a sort of exhausted-looking manner. I’d managed to roughly explain the situation without bringing up any of Sayumi’s personal history from back in middle school. “Should I be offended, Andou? Are you trying to say that Takanashi’s more suited to being the president than I am?”

“Huh…? Oh! No, that’s not how I meant it at all!” I replied in a fluster.

“I was kidding,” said Kudou with a sardonic chuckle. Then she started telling her story in an almost nostalgic tone. “Takanashi and I were, well…I suppose you could say we were rivals, or at least something close to that. I know this might sound like I’m bragging, but ever since we started high school, the two of us have been battling for first and second place on our tests.”

“That’s incredible,” I interjected.

“We were never particularly close, but I *think* we both considered each other rivals. I certainly saw her that way, at the very least,” Kudou continued. Then she told me how, as the school year wore on and everyone got used to their new environment, before they knew it, all the students and teachers around them had internalized the idea that either Takanashi Sayumi or Kudou Mirei would end up becoming the next student council president. It wasn’t like either of them had tried to spread that idea around—it had just come about naturally.

Our high school chose its student council members during their second year. Specifically, prospective candidates would campaign for their positions on the council during the latter half of their second year in high school, and those who were chosen would take up their positions on the council itself during their third year. The president was no exception to this system.

“I wanted to be the president,” Kudou explained. “I think Takanashi did too. Everyone in our grade thought so. But then, in the end…she didn’t even run for the position. I won the election by a landslide, yes, but only because Takanashi wasn’t there to run against me. It wasn’t a victory I’ve ever felt proud of. The other candidates were all just throwing their names into the running for kicks, basically—none of them were serious about winning.”

Kudou looked a little sad, almost. It seemed to me that she’d *wanted* to face off against Sayumi—against her rival—for the president’s position.

“So…do you know why she didn’t run?” I asked.

“I’ve always wondered that myself,” said Kudou. “Recently, though, I’ve finally developed a theory.”

I gasped. “Wh-What is it…?” I asked, so invested I found myself rising partially out of my chair.

Kudou offered a short, simple answer. “I assume it was her power’s fault.”

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

“Your powers awakened about half a year ago, right? Well, that lines up perfectly with the student council’s election season,” said Kudou.

I’d heard that Kudou’s power, *Grateful Robber*, had awakened sometime in April this year. The five of us, on the other hand, obtained ours in September of the previous year. The week after our school’s cultural festival, specifically.

That’s right. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it sooner. We got our powers around the beginning of the second half of Sayumi’s second year in high school—precisely the period when she would’ve been running for the student council.

“In all likelihood…I think Takanashi decided to prioritize her relationships with you, the members of the literary club, over her chance to become the president. Don’t you think? I mean, I’m sure that awakening to crazy supernatural powers out of nowhere was pretty stressful for everyone,” said Kudou.

I couldn’t bring myself to reply, so a moment later, she spoke up once more. “I…was alone. I was all on my own after I obtained my power. I agonized over it *because* I was on my own—but of course, I’m sure it goes both ways. I bet that going through all that in a group meant having your fair share of troubles and conflicts as well, right?”

“So, she did it for us…?” I whispered.

“That feels like a sort of patronizing way of putting it, but essentially, yes,” said Kudou. Once again, I found myself speechless. “The way *I* would put it is that she chose a path forward as the president of the literary club, rather than a path as the president of the student council,” she added with a smile.

Kudou’s explanation was convincing, no question about it, but something about it all still made me feel sort of sad. From Sayumi’s perspective, her power’s awakening probably felt like a sudden and unexpected accident, and that accident had forced her to give up on her dream…

No. That’s not right at all.

Something felt wrong. *Very* wrong. It didn’t take much self-reflection to figure out what either. I scanned back through my memories, stacking them up against Kudou’s theory, and I quickly realized something very important. *That’s right—Kudou doesn’t know. She has no idea that Sayumi and I fought over what to do with our powers.*

“Kudou,” I said after a moment of hesitation. “When exactly is the student council election held?”

“The applications stay open until the end of September,” said Kudou. “Candidates have the first half of October to campaign, then a chance to give their final speeches before the vote happens. Why do you ask?”

From the end of September to halfway through October. The dates lined up perfectly. That was the exact period when I’d had my conflict with Sayumi—when she’d suggested we do away with our powers and I’d objected. I’d argued with every ounce of stubborn persistence I could muster, over and over, and eventually even came to blows with her. I grimaced. *Well, goddammit.*

It was all my fault after all!

Sayumi really had chosen her literary club presidency over the student council. In that sense, Kudou wasn’t wrong. But this was *Sayumi* we were talking about. If she’d put her mind to it, she could’ve easily managed both concurrently. *Or at least, she could’ve if I’d kept my stupid mouth shut!*

That’s right... It was me. I’m the one who stole Sayumi’s dream from her. My selfishness snatched away her chance to overcome her regrets from middle school—to put all those lessons she’d learned from her failure to use. And what did I go and say to her yesterday?

“Why didn’t you join the student council in high school?”

“Hey, Andou! Where’re you—” shouted Kudou, but before she could finish, I sprinted out of the student council room without even pausing to say goodbye.

Chapter 7: Amends, Albeit Abnormal Ones

I couldn't say for sure how much time had passed. Evening was rapidly drawing closer, though, and the glow of sunset was gradually setting the sky above me aflame. Below me, meanwhile, a boy lay sprawled out on the ground, covered in dirt and mud.

I had no clue how many times I'd thrown him at that point. I stopped counting after the tenth. In a contest of pure hand-to-hand combat ability, I was at an overwhelming advantage, and his gentlemanly insistence on not striking a woman meant he was completely incapable of mounting a counterattack. He'd simply start reciting his incantation, I would take him down, he'd get back up, and we'd start the process all over, time and time again.

"Isn't this enough, Andou?" I asked, trying to persuade him to see reason as he doggedly forced himself to his feet once more. I found my voice quavering in spite of myself. The man was like a zombie, getting back up no matter how many times I defeated him, and at some point, my mindset had begun to transcend exasperation and enter the realm of fear. I was *frightened*.

Yes, really. Somehow, the boy before me had actually *scared* me.

"J-Just stop this already, Andou!" shouted Tomoyo.

"Listen to her, Juu!" added Hatoko. It seemed the two of them just couldn't stand watching Andou stagger to his feet any longer, and they were about to run over to him…until Chifuyu, of all people, stood before them, holding her little arms as wide apart as she possibly could to block their path.

"Ch-Chifuyu…" said Tomoyo.

"You can't get in their way," said Chifuyu.

"But Andou's—"

"Andou hasn't lost yet," Chifuyu declared. Her youthful voice was laced with a strong, unshakeable sense of will. Her motives, meanwhile, were inscrutable. Either she wasn't thinking anything at all, or she was being driven by something that only she could perceive. Regardless, Tomoyo and Hatoko were overwhelmed by her resolve and found themselves unable to squeeze in another word edgewise.

I looked away from them and back to the foe in front of me. "Why do you keep standing up?" I asked him.

Andou raised his head once again, looking me squarely in the eye. A flame burned within his gaze—a blaze of spirit that drove him to fight and showed no sign of dying down. "I'll stand up as many times as it takes," said Andou. "And I'll do it for one reason: to stay true to myself!"

I wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to that. It was certainly a stylish thing to say, in a manner of speaking, but from a rational perspective, it didn’t really *mean* anything in particular. It was a claim that fundamentally lacked the specificity it needed to make sense. I knew for a fact that he thought it had been transcendentally cool, though. He wouldn’t have had that obnoxious smirk on his face otherwise. *Remarkable. I can’t think of any possible way he could be more obnoxious than this.*

“Is your plan to win by sheer tenacity?” I asked. “For the record, I have no intention of surrendering, no matter how much of my time you waste. I promise that I will give you an up close and personal introduction to the ground as many times as it takes to make you admit defeat.”

“Ha ha,” Andou chuckled wearily. “How about *you* stop attacking me while I’m mid-Malediction, Sayumi? Or what, are you too scared to fight me when I’m at full power?”

“Really?” I sighed, brushing aside his nonsensical provocation. “Are you really *that* invested in playing these silly games with your power?”

“Yes,” replied Andou without the slightest shred of hesitation.

So any further attempt at persuasion would be meaningless. Yes, I see now. If we had any hope of resolving this dispute with words, we never would have come to blows in the first place.

“Use your power, Andou,” I commanded. “This time, I promise that I will not attack you during your ‘Malediction.’ I will take a hint, stand back, and silently watch until your preparations are complete. Do as you please, and make the most of it while you can. I’d prefer if you didn’t have any lingering regrets after I’m finished with you.”

For a moment, Andou’s eyes widened with shock. An instant later, though, he was chuckling away in his usual excessively overdramatic fashion. “Are you sure about that? Don’t blame me for what happens.”

“Just hurry it up.”

Andou raised his right arm before him and silently closed his eyes. Then he began chanting his incantation. “I am he who conquers chaos!” it began, followed by a string of convoluted phrasings, only some of which I vaguely remembered having heard before. It seemed that the specifics of the chant had yet to be ironed out, yet Andou kept reciting them with such intensity it was almost unnerving. He was like a real-world wizard, or something to that effect. Like a fearsome demon lord reborn onto our earth.

“…and bare thine fangs at the arrogance of providence!” Andou concluded, then unleashed his power. With a sputtering roar, jet-black flames erupted from his arm, engulfing him. They shimmered in the air, burning in a shade of black one would never encounter in the natural world, darting and twisting about him as they gathered up upon his right hand.

“Witness my true form. Witness me in all my dreadful, unsightly, and *truly* sinful glory,” Andou whispered in a tone tinged with sorrow as he gazed upon his flame-cloaked arm. That tone, of course, was somewhat betrayed by the downright ecstatic look upon his face. His expression had

“Oh man, I am *so* hella cool!” written all over it. On the one hand, I thought he was pathetic, but on the other, a part of me actually did understand him. There really *was* a certain sense of appealing depravity to the sight of him wreathed in profoundly unnatural black flame, a fiery silhouette lit by the blazing-red sky above him.

“Come to think of it, have you named your power yet?” I asked.

“Heh. Yes, it *would* need a name, wouldn’t it? I suppose it would be inconvenient to have nothing to call it,” said Andou. It took every ounce of my willpower to not call him out on his hypocrisy. “Darker than the blackest of nights. Darker than death, darker than sin. Dark, dark, dark, to the very core of its being... A tragic flame burning black, ceaseless and eternal... Yes. I’ve decided.”

Andou held his flaming arm aloft, brandishing it toward the heavens above.

“I dub this power *Dark and Dark*!”

I paused for a moment to consider what I’d just witnessed. He had done his best to make it look like he’d come up with that name on the spur of the moment, right when he needed it most...but this was *Andou* I was dealing with. I was all but certain that he’d decided upon the name well in advance, and that he’d spent an exorbitant amount of time weighing his options beforehand.

“Yes, *Dark and Dark*: the stygian flames of purgatory! And yes, the use of the specific word ‘stygian’ *is* intentional and *is* thematically significant, so try to remember it, thanks!” Andou continued, diving deep into the nitpicky particulars of his antiquated word choice.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or sigh. *I* was conflicted beyond measure, but Andou, at least, seemed satisfied, and that was enough for me.

I’d given him enough time to make some memories before the end.

“I take it that you’ve done everything you wanted to? You have nothing left to regret now?” I said. “Good. In that case...I believe it’s high time we moved on to an *actual* supernatural battle.”

I bolted forward, drawing up next to him in an instant. Andou was too busy basking in his own power to stop me as I grabbed his flaming right arm. It was lukewarm, at most—a truly unremarkable level of heat. Andou’s power was so utterly bereft of any potential to cause harm that I could touch it directly without the slightest fear of consequence. I wrenched his arm around him, pinning it behind his back. Then, as I established a firm joint lock, I forced him down onto the ground. This wasn’t a technique from my studies of judo or aikido. It was a technique that my father had taught me, used by the police to take suspects into custody.

“U-Ugggh,” Andou moaned from beneath me. His power was still active, his arm blazing away as I held it in place.

“*Dark and Dark*, you called it?” I said, talking down to Andou in both a literal and rhetorical sense. “I feel bad doing this to you after you’ve worked

so hard to finally settle on a name for it, but it's time for you to say your goodbyes to your power."

"What?!" grunted Andou.

"I'm saying that I will now use *Route of Origin* to erase *Dark and Dark* from existence. You've had your fun, haven't you? Surely this was enough."

"W-Wait a second! This wasn't the deal! I haven't admitted defeat yet!"

"This is a supernatural battle. Any and all use of our powers is permitted. You said that yourself, didn't you, Andou? And if those are the rules, then I am free to use my power however I see fit."

Andou clenched his teeth. I felt a sense of guilt budding within me—like the guilt I would feel if I were to take away a child's favorite toy—but I shook it off just as quickly. *This is for the best. These powers were not meant to be wielded by mankind.*

"It's time for you to return to the way you were meant to be, Andou."

"Route of Origin."

And so, our long, drawn-out battle finally came to a close. Andou's black flame would slowly fade away, like a candle consuming the last remnants of its wick. Having lost his power, I was sure that he would finally see reason. I could move on to erase the other three members' abilities, then do away with my own, enabling all of us to finally return to our everyday lives.

It was over. It *should* have been over.

"What?!" I yelped—almost screamed—involuntarily. I'd been frightened by the shocking fact that Andou's black flame was still burning within my grasp. "*Dark and Dark*...wasn't erased?!"

Somehow, in defiance of my power, almost as if nothing had happened to it at all, the flame was still flaring and flickering away. It was strange. It was unnerving. It was like it was immortal, like it was the fire of the undying phoenix itself. A jet-black flame that could never be doused. The phenomenon before me was so outlandish, I found myself terribly shaken by the sight of it.

"But, why...?" I muttered. Did Route of Origin not activate properly? No, it did—I could feel myself use my power...so why?

I could hear the rest of our friends gasp. They'd seen our fight from start to finish, and they were just as stunned by this unexpected development as I was. Andou had a slightly different, slightly stranger look on his face, though. He didn't look shocked. If anything, he looked grief-stricken.

"Andou, don't tell me... You didn't—"

☆

"Is that actually you, Andou...? What on earth are you doing in front of my house?"

After I sprinted out from the student council office, I hadn't been able to restrain myself and ended up heading directly for Sayumi's place. It was only *after* I'd arrived that I realized I had no clue how I was going to face

her, and that I didn't even know if she'd be home yet by the time I'd arrived. *I guess if she's not around, Maiya might be…? Oh, but there's also a chance her dad could answer the door. What the heck would I do about* that*?!* Anyway, long story short, I ended up standing around and agonizing over it all for about twenty minutes, then who should show up but Sayumi herself?

"Do you need something?" she asked as she walked up to me. She was wearing her uniform, and from what I could tell, she'd just gotten home.

"Sayumi…I'm so sorry!" I replied with a deep, apologetic bow. I didn't really know precisely what to apologize for or how to do it, so I just went all-in on the most classical method possible.

"U-Umm… For what, exactly? What have you done this time?" asked Sayumi.

"I…I said something really, really insensitive to you. I didn't *know* how bad it was at the time, but still… And, I mean, it was also all my fault to begin with! I just had to go and insist that we should keep our powers… You would've been the president if it weren't for me…"

"E-Err…"

"I get that you probably don't want anything to do with me anymore. I know that this isn't something I can make up for with an apology…"

"Excuse me…?"

"But still, I'm really, really sorry!"

"*Andou*!" Sayumi shouted. I jumped, then finally looked up at her.

"What in the world have you been apologizing for this whole time?" Sayumi asked, looking utterly mystified. "I haven't been able to follow a single thing you've said to me. Start over, and explain yourself from the very beginning."

As the sun sank below the horizon and night began to fall, Sayumi and I walked side by side through the neighborhood around her house. We almost went into her house to talk, but since Maiya was home and her energy level wasn't really appropriate for the sort of mood we had going on, we decided that doing it outside would be for the best. I *did* get my student handbook back while I was there, though.

"Yes, I believe I understand now. It seems that Maiya and Kudou are both rather talkative about other people's affairs," Sayumi said with a weary sigh as I wrapped up my explanation. "Before anything else, I should resolve a misapprehension you're under. Andou?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not actually upset with you."

I paused. "Uh?"

"The way you asked me why I hadn't become the student council president yesterday didn't bother me in the slightest."

"Wh-Whaaat?!" I shouted. "B-But, didn't you get into a really bad mood right after I said it? And, like, you looked like something was really tearing you up inside…?"

“If that’s how I looked to you, it was because the medicine I took was making me sleepy.”

Her medicine…? Oh, right—I guess she did say something along those lines at the time, didn’t she? “S-So wait, that wasn’t just an excuse you made up on the fly to tell me to leave?”

“No, it was not. It was the truth. I was genuinely just very sleepy. I went to lie down right after you left. I could hardly have gone to bed with a guest in my room, don’t you think?” Sayumi added as an afterthought.

“Okay, but…why didn’t you come to club today? I thought it was because you didn’t want to see me…”

“I believe I sent a text on the subject, didn’t I? I had to visit the ophthalmologist’s office by the station to purchase a new set of contact lenses today.”

“It’s fine,” I sighed. “You don’t have to make excuses for yourself. If you don’t want to be around me, you can just tell me—”

“The receipt,” said Sayumi, cutting me off and holding out a scrap of paper she pulled from her wallet. It was a receipt with “Sasaki Ophthalmology” printed on it. Her evidence was irrefutable. “Andou, I hate to say it, but, well…this sort of self-deprecation makes you come across as a little self-absorbed.” She sounded a little fed up with me.

“Wait, so…that means that all of this was just one big misunderstanding? I was just getting myself all worked up and freaked out over nothing?”

“That’s correct, yes.”

Now it was my turn to let out a heavy sigh. “Man…I feel kinda stupid for worrying now.” I felt simultaneously relieved and let down, in a weird and complicated sort of way. Getting all worked up over a nonissue like that was more than a little humiliating, but if Sayumi wasn’t offended—if I hadn’t hurt her—then that was what really mattered above all else. *Seriously, thank goodness.*

“But wait…Sayumi? It *is* true that it’s my fault you didn’t get to be the student council president, isn’t it?” I asked. While today and yesterday’s issue had been resolved, the issue from a half year ago still had yet to be addressed. “If I hadn’t gone off on my stupid campaign against you, you would’ve… I mean, I guess I can’t say you *definitely* would’ve won the election, but you would’ve had the chance to face off against Kudou for real, at least.”

“There…might be some truth to that,” Sayumi admitted with a smile that didn’t tell me much at all about how she was really feeling. I chewed anxiously at my lip as she continued. “However, I want to make sure you’re not misunderstanding me. Andou. Even if that is true, I do not resent you in any way for it. If anything, I’m grateful.”

I was struck dumb, and Sayumi continued. “It’s true that if you hadn’t opposed me and if we’d come to a quicker understanding regarding our powers, I may have been able to immediately begin campaigning and join the election. Of course, I have my doubts about whether I would have

managed to defeat Kudou with such last-minute preparations…but regardless, there's no way I would ever resent you for that. I would never resent you for wrapping me up in a plot so kindly and well-intentioned."

☆

"Welp. Andou sure isn't coming back, is he?" I grumbled to Hatoko. She was sitting across the table from me as I stared idly at the club room's clock.

Over an hour had passed since Andou said he was going to the student council room. Chifuyu had declared that she was "going to go play at Cookie's house" and left a while back, leaving Hatoko and I to carry out club activities on our lonesome for the second day in a row.

"He left his bag here, so it's not like he'd go home, right…?" I muttered. "What the hell is that guy *doing*?"

"Good question!" said Hatoko. "Why don't we wait just a little while longer, then head on home if he doesn't come back? I can drop his bag off at his house on my way home."

"Yeah, good idea. Let's do that," I agreed. "So…what'll we do until then? Play cards?"

Hatoko and I got along pretty well, at least as far as I was concerned. I mean, I know that *I* liked *her*, at the very least, and I considered her a pretty close friend. And yet, when I ended up alone in a room with her, the best idea I could come up with to pass the time was playing cards. It was…I dunno, kinda tragic, somehow. *Don't we have* any *shared interests? If Andou were here, I'm sure he'd come up with some sort of stupid game, and I'd end up getting dragged into it in spite of—*

"Hey, Tomoyo?" said Hatoko as I stood up to go look for a deck of cards. I froze. She had on the same gentle smile as ever, and she was looking me right in the eye. "Can we talk about something sorta serious for a little?"

Chapter 8: An Ending, Yet Also, an Origin

At first, I thought that I may have run afoul of some previously unknown limitation to my power. I'd always believed that *Route of Origin*'s ability to alter reality was inexhaustible, but maybe there was either some risk to using it or some maximum number of times I could invoke it, and I'd unknowingly overstepped that boundary. Although such a possibility may have been able to explain why my power didn't activate…ultimately, the theory didn't actually make sense. This was the first time I'd used my power that day. I'd held it in reserve all the way throughout our battle. In short, that hypothesis seemed easy enough to dismiss offhand.

The next theory I'd come up with was that some sort of imbalance between our powers was to blame. I pondered whether our powers worked like in *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, where some Divine cards had priority over others—like how Obelisk's special ability wouldn't work on Ra. I considered that, perhaps, *Route of Origin* hadn't worked on *Dark and Dark* due to a discrepancy in their ranks...but I threw out that theory just as quickly as I had the first one. It wasn't entirely impossible, but I couldn't believe Andou would have figured that out on his own in advance.

Whatever the explanation was, I could clearly tell that Andou had known my power wouldn't work on his. I thought through what had happened once more with that fact in mind, and I finally found my answer.

"Andou, don't tell me… You didn't predict *all* of this in advance, did you?" I asked, still holding him to the ground. Physically speaking, I held the clear upper hand, yet if you were judging solely by the tone of my voice, you'd think *I* was the one who was cornered. "Did you know that I wouldn't be able to erase your power? That I wouldn't be able to convince myself that you were meant to be powerless?"

It was all a question of perspective. *Route of Origin*'s abilities were dictated solely by my own subjective opinions. If I believed from the bottom of my heart that something was meant to be a certain way, I could make it so—and on the other hand, if I did *not* believe, my power would have no effect, no matter how hard I tried to use it.

I believed that humans weren't meant to have supernatural powers. But that was just my *intellectual* belief. Deep down in my heart, it seemed I hadn't truly been convinced after all.

"It's not that I knew this would happen for sure," said Andou after a pause. "I just thought that it was possible. No, actually, I thought it was likely."

I sat there, speechless. Eventually, Andou started to squirm. "So, um, do you think you could let my arm go, for now? It's starting to go numb."

I had, in fact, lost track of the fact that I still had his arm in a joint lock. I released him immediately—after all, whatever was happening at the moment, our match was clearly over.

Andou stood up and began to speak, sounding a little reserved for once. “Sayumi, you talked about how you don’t think people are meant to have powers like ours. That would mean that *you* weren’t the way you were meant to be while you had powers either. And, well, I’ve always questioned that. Could you, having obtained a power of your own, *really* believe from the bottom of your heart that you weren’t the way you were meant to be?”

I took a moment to attempt some self-reflection. If someone else were in this same position, it’s possible that *they* could have used *Route of Origin* to wipe away somebody’s supernatural power with the greatest of ease. But I was not someone else: I was me, the person who wanted to be worthy of praise, the person who wanted to be perfect. I could never have accepted that I was *not* the way that I was meant to be. The idea was almost unbearable.

“You’re a bit of a perfectionist, Sayumi,” said Andou. “When things get complicated and contradictory, plenty of people are cool with just not thinking about it too hard, but you’ve never been like that. I figured that using your supernatural power to wipe away a supernatural power was a sort of paradox that you just wouldn’t be able to deal with.”

I was stunned. So utterly shocked that I felt a chill run down my spine. Andou had reached the conclusion that I couldn’t use *Route of Origin* to erase people’s powers by way of pure conjecture—and he’d been *right*. He’d seen through to the heart of the matter in a way that I’d been incapable of.

“Then…why didn’t you just tell me that?” I asked, unable to stop myself. “If you had, we wouldn’t have had to go through with this whole fight in the first place. You wouldn’t have had to get thrown to the ground over and over again.”

Andou hesitated for a moment, then finally muttered his response. “I wanted there to be some hope left for us.”

“What do you mean, hope…?”

“I wanted to leave the possibility that we could use *Route of Origin* to get rid of our powers at any time on the table. I thought that it would, well…help all of this weigh on everyone a little less.”

Suddenly, I felt profoundly ashamed of myself. I had always thought of Andou Jurai as being adorably childish, though every once in a while that very childishness led to me feeling rather disappointed in him. It was clear now, though, that I’d grievously underestimated him. Andou had been considering our powers in a way that far exceeded the thought that I had put into them, and he had shown far deeper consideration for all of us than anything I’d ever managed. And, most of all…he’d been thinking about *me* more than even I myself had.

“I know I was being kinda unreasonable,” Andou continued. “I can talk a big game about keeping hope alive, but it’s not like I could’ve kept it a

secret forever…plus, I spent all night trying to come up with a plan to beat you, and the best I managed was ‘stay stubborn and hope it works out,’” Andou said with a chuckle.

I knew very well that he was just being considerate of my feelings, and I fell to my knees, overwhelmed by my own inadequacy. I felt so pathetic that I was on the verge of tears.

“I’ve…been scared,” I admitted in a faint, almost inaudible voice. “I’m scared of my power. I’m scared of *all* of our powers. I can’t trust myself, and I can’t trust any of you either…”

I was weak. I couldn’t take joy in my power like Andou. I couldn’t accept it like Tomoyo. I couldn’t trust my friends unconditionally like Hatoko. I couldn’t stay positive and cope with things as they came like Chifuyu. My composure was faltering, like a string stretched so taut as to snap, and the weakness that I’d kept so carefully concealed was leaking to the surface little by little.

“All this time I’ve wondered, what should I do if one of us decides to misuse their power? What should I do if my power were to run out of control? I don’t know how to act. I don’t know what’s right,” I lamented.

Andou smiled slightly uncomfortably. “I don’t really know how to say this, but…you really are kind of a worrywart, you know? I don’t know if it’s because you’re the president or because you’re the oldest, but either way, you don’t have to feel *that* responsible for the rest of us.” Then he shrugged, smiled, and spoke in a truly lighthearted tone. “So let’s just have some fun! Let’s all use our powers to play around, somehow. I’ve got *so* much stuff I want to do with them, you wouldn’t even believe it! I’ve spent longer than you could imagine wondering when I’d finally get a power like this, you know?”

Andou smiled at me. It was a comforting, powerful smile that seemed to melt away all the fears and anxiety that had built up within me.

“I think there’s a lot that I can teach you, Sayumi. I’ll teach you how amazing supernatural powers can be! How cool they are, how fun they are…and how they’re nothing to be scared of.”

It was plain to see that he was putting on a front. Deep down, I was sure that Andou understood better than any of us how terrifying our powers really were. But in spite of that, he smiled on.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Andou continued, “I’m sure there’s gonna be a ton of stuff we’ll have to think pretty hard about. So when that time comes, I say we think about it together. And in the one in a million chance that one of us goes out of control…I’ll stop them myself,” said Andou. He made it sound like such a simple thing.

I hesitated for a moment. “With *your* power? What on earth could you even do to stop us?”

“I’ll just have to go through an awakening when the time comes!”

“You can’t possibly expect me to believe something that convenient is guaranteed to happen.”

“Hmm. I dunno. I have a feeling that I could go through an awakening for you guys no problem.”

How much of this is he serious about? I wondered, then chastised myself. The answer was obvious. *All* of it was serious, and I was starting to buy into it. I somehow almost believed that Andou really could go through an awakening or two if it were for the sake of his friends. That cool, kindhearted, pathological chuuni had all but convinced me.

“Andou,” I said, leaning forward. I was already on my knees, and now I bowed deeply, lowering my head almost all the way to the ground in an expression of apology and respect toward my opponent. “I admit defeat.”

I had been utterly bested. From start to finish, my loss had been assured.

And so, the curtain fell on Takanashi Sayumi and Andou Jurai’s supernatural battle, the match having been called in Andou’s favor.

☆

This isn’t something that most people really think about, but the words “corrupt” and “profane” actually have pretty distinct nuances. When something has been corrupted, that means that it’s been dirtied by external factors, whereas when something is profane, it is *intrinsically* contaminated on a spiritual level. And that makes sense when you trace the word’s origins —“profane” was originally used in a religious context, indicating something that was in defiance of religious doctrine.

Being that profanity is a more spiritual than physical concept, it follows that just about anything—time or space, the mind or the body, ideology or action—could be called profane so long as it is in some way not in its ideal form. In other words: “profane” is a word that indicates something is not the way it’s meant to be.

It seems reasonable, then, to say that Sayumi’s power, *Route of Origin*, was the power to purge the profane and restore it to its rightful state. It was the power to wipe all of creation clean of that which renders it *wrong*: the power of purification. And that power…was unable to wipe away our abilities. There’d be no dispelling this magic.

I had predicted that in advance, yes, but I have to admit that when Sayumi actually did use her power, and it actually did fail to erase *Dark and Dark*, I was a little happy about it. *Oh, good,* I thought. *Sayumi doesn’t consider our powers to be profane after all. She really is too kindhearted of a person to reject that side of us—and that side of herself.* I’d known all of that about her already, but the extra certainty still felt nice.

“The sunset on that evening was just as vibrant as today’s, wasn’t it?” said Sayumi. We’d walked a short ways away from her place, came to a small, nearby park, and taken a seat on a bench. Sayumi was looking up at the sky, her gaze distant and her tone laced with nostalgia. I could only assume she was thinking back to the day we’d fought it out.

“Yeah, I won’t forget that any time soon,” I replied. “I mean, you bowed down to me and everything!”

“That was not ‘bowing down,’” said Sayumi. “That was a formal gesture of respect commonly performed in tea ceremonies.”

“And how does that make it different?”

“It’s a matter of nuance.” Sayumi sounded ever so slightly sulky, but then she closed her eyes and continued, her voice taking on a much more gentle affect. “As of now, I can say with confidence that I don’t regret missing my chance to become the student council president in the least. Those are my unvarnished and genuine feelings, I assure you.”

Sayumi paused for a moment, and I silently waited until she spoke up once more. “When I was in middle school, my pursuit of perfection resulted in my own isolation. At the time, I was convinced that I was in the right. The apathy of my fellow student council members irritated me to no end…but looking back, it is now clear to me that I was mistaken. I was so obsessed with results and efficiency that I disregarded my coworkers. My way of doing things…could hardly have been more unlike yours, Andou.” She turned to look into my eyes, her gaze carrying a certain sense of warmth. “You have something, Andou. Something that I don’t.”

“Well, that’s, uh…kinda embarrassing to hear. I don’t think I really *did* much of anything,” I awkwardly admitted. All that time that Sayumi spent scolding me and messing with me made it feel really weird when she came right out and praised me to my face.

“You might say that my decision to become the student council president in high school was motivated by my desire to wipe away the trauma of my experience in middle school. It was an attempt to atone, and an attempt to take responsibility for my failings,” said Sayumi with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Pathetic, isn’t it? In the end, I was still only ever thinking about myself. My sole motivation to run for the position was a desire for self-satisfaction. Somebody like me would never have been worthy of that sort of leadership role.”

“Okay, but who cares if you were doing it for self-satisfaction?” I countered. “Just because you were trying to satisfy yourself doesn’t mean that other people won’t be satisfied with what you do in the process.”

Sayumi didn’t reply. She just gave me an ever so slight smile that I couldn’t quite read, then moved the conversation along. “The whole thing was ridiculous, really. How could anyone possibly consider me worthy of praise?”

“Sayumi…” I muttered.

She had told me about how her grandmother always used to say that to her—that she should “become a person who is worthy of praise.” I didn’t want to speak ill of the deceased, and I definitely didn’t want to insult somebody who Sayumi so clearly looked up to. Even so, though, I had something I couldn’t just leave unsaid.

“What’s so bad about *not* being praiseworthy?” I said, looking her straight in the eye. “You’re you, Sayumi. *Nobody* lives their life in an absolutely praiseworthy way, and there’s no such thing as a perfect person.

Still, though, I think you're great the way you are, no matter *how* praiseworthy you might be."

For some reason, Sayumi's eyes widened with shock. Then, a moment later, she let out a laugh. "'Become a person who is worthy of praise.' Those were my grandmother's words, and she said them more times than I can count. But that wasn't *all* she said."

"It wasn't...?"

"'Become a person who is worthy of praise. So long as you do, then surely, you will find someone who will tell you that you don't have to be worthy of praise at all.'"

I was now very, *very* confused. *Wait, what? So, are you supposed to be praiseworthy, or not?* Thankfully, Sayumi wasn't finished explaining herself yet.

"This world is full of kind and compassionate expressions of reassurance. 'You don't have to try so hard.' 'Just be yourself.' 'Try to be the only one, not number one.' Etcetera, etcetera. Wonderful expressions, all of them, yet they all have one thing in common: they must be used out of admiration or gratitude—*not* out of compromise or resignation. I believe *that* is what my grandmother wanted to communicate to me."

They're words to be used out of admiration or gratitude, but not compromise or resignation. In other words, Sayumi's grandmother was telling her that phrases like "you don't have to try so hard" were meant to be told to you by other people, *not* for you to tell to yourself. I would never have told Sayumi that she didn't have to be praiseworthy if I hadn't already been under the impression that she'd *been* living a praiseworthy life up to this point.

"I certainly never imagined that *you* would be the one to say it to me, though," said Sayumi with an amused snicker.

Well, crap. Somehow, it felt like Sayumi's grandmother had set me up for this. Having that sort of impact on the world of the living even after you've passed on into the afterlife? She must've been one hell of a woman.

Sayumi sighed, then returned to a more serious tone as she spoke on. "You're not wrong, Andou. Nobody is praiseworthy all the time, and there's no such thing as a perfect human being. Nevertheless, I choose to make perfection my goal. I may never become a person who is worthy of praise. I may never even get close to that ideal. However, I do *not* believe that the effort I put into becoming that way is necessarily wasted, regardless of the results."

The look on Sayumi's face was cheerful and free of doubt. There wasn't a trace of regret to her expression—she simply faced forward with drive and optimism. *Just...damnations, seriously. Sayumi's so hella cool, I don't even know what to say about it.* She was strong, wise, and courteous, but never arrogant. She was always as humble as could be, recognizing her strengths and weaknesses with the utmost of objectivity. She was a role model who had well and truly earned my respect.

“Y’know, if I were a girl, I seriously think I would’ve fallen for you just now,” I commented offhandedly.

“Andou…” Sayumi said, her gentle smile shifting into a severe frown in the blink of an eye. “You should know that you have a bad habit of saying almost unimaginably indelicate things on occasion. You should work on that,” she added with a pointed glare.

H-Huh? But that was supposed to be a compliment!

While I was busy sweating bullets, Sayumi let out a long, heavy sigh. “Really, Andou. I’ll freely admit that you’ve taught me quite a few things, but it seems that I still have much, *much* more to teach *you* in exchange.”

“L-Like what?” I asked.

“Like, for instance…how to understand the workings of a woman’s heart, I suppose,” said Sayumi with a mischievous chuckle.

Hmm.

I see now that I still don’t understand any of this.

But I do know that this autumn sky that could never be grasped within the palm of my hand…

…is the womanly heart.

Nah, not gonna use a whole page on the gag the second time around. At a certain point, you’re just wasting paper.

“Well, in any case,” said Sayumi, “I thank you in advance for your continued guidance and encouragement.”

“Likewise,” I replied.

☆

Soon after that, our conversation came to a close. More specifically, Andou said, “Okay, I’d better get heading home… Oh, *crap*, my bag!” then sped off toward our school.

I, on the other hand, stayed seated on the bench and took a deep breath as I watched him go. When all was said and done, this entire affair had turned out to be nothing more than Andou getting worked up and making a fuss over a problem that hadn’t actually existed. I’ll admit that my own behavior was perhaps a touch misleading, and I did feel some degree of responsibility for that, but Andou’s jumping to a hasty conclusion was by far the bigger factor. He had called me a worrywart, but in my view, that term suited him to a far greater degree.

Upon further reflection, though, it struck me that his particular method of worrying about his friends was ever so slightly peculiar. After all, what had just happened between us fit the same pattern as what had happened with both Hatoko and Chifuyu. In every case, Andou had assumed the worst to an extreme degree and blamed himself beyond the point of reason. It seemed to me that he had an intense fear of losing his friends, and I couldn’t help but wonder whether something had happened to him in the past to prompt that fixation.

“No…I’m overthinking this,” I told myself, then reached over toward my bag. Today, I had neglected to attend my club activities in favor of paying a visit to my ophthalmologist and the contact lens shop, where I’d made a certain purchase. I pulled my acquisition out of my bag, rested it on my knees, and spent a moment staring at it.

Really, now. Why did *I go and buy these?* I felt a deep sense of regret and an intense, burning sense of shame as I opened up the package and pulled out its contents: a pair of ruby-framed, ever so slightly eye-catching glasses. I had no need for them. I had no intention of breaking my habit of wearing contact lenses, and the prescription of the glasses I wore at home was still up to date, so why on earth had I—

“I’ve never seen you in glasses before, but, well…they really suit you, Sayumi.”

Suddenly, it felt like my face had caught fire. The fact that I’d been so transparently influenced by such an obviously empty compliment was laughable beyond all belief. Surely there was *some* rational limit to how unsightly of a manner I would allow myself to behave in? All I could do was laugh at myself. But, of course, I *had* bought them, so I took a deep breath and raised the glasses to my face—

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

—and froze. A man’s voice had just rung out from behind me.

“Wearing glasses is a surefire way to throw the game. The glasses girl always loses, trust me—they’re the secondary heroine to the bitter end. It’s an unwritten rule of fiction these days. Couldn’t tell you why, but for some reason, glasses-wearing heroines just never end up with a decent fanbase.”

I jumped up from the bench and spun around.

“Hey there,” said the boy who’d appeared out of nowhere behind me. “It’s me, Sagamin, aka Sagami Shizumu.”

And it was indeed. Sagami Shizumu: Andou’s friend, and a remarkably handsome young man. He was wearing a jinbei, a sort of light, traditional summer clothing, and had a pair of equally traditional sandals on his feet. In one hand, he held a plastic bag, and in the other, a half-eaten popsicle. Everything about the way he presented himself practically screamed that he’d just popped out to the nearby convenience store for an evening snack.

“Yes, I know you…Sagami, was it?” I replied.

“That’s me,” said Sagami. “This is our first time talking, though, Takanashi.”

“What brings you here?” I asked.

“I live right nearby, that’s all. Total coincidence,” Sagami explained. “Sorry, one second. Have to finish this,” he added, then scarfed down the remainder of his popsicle and glanced at the leftover stick. “Oh, not a winner? Shame. If I’d won another popsicle for free, it would’ve felt like I’d

stumbled into some sort of event and set myself off along the Takanashi route."

"He he he! A shame indeed," I replied. He played himself up as quite the womanizer, it seemed. Andou had described him once as "the natural enemy of the women of the world and the fated nemesis of the men," and I was finally starting to understand what he had meant by it.

Of course, that was far from the first thing on my mind at the moment. No, I was preoccupied by a much bigger question...

"So, Sagami. Were you listening to my conversation with Andou?"

...that being the question of whether he had heard the two of us discussing our powers.

"Yes," Sagami readily admitted. "Well, I think I heard most of it, anyway. I guess if I wanted to try to make myself sound like some sort of hero, I'd say, 'I've heard everything, and I'm here to help!'"

"How strange," I replied. "When you put it that way, it almost makes you sound *admirable* for eavesdropping on a private conversation."

"Oh, and I heard something about superpowers," Sagami added offhandedly. I instantly felt myself tense up and began to prepare for the worst, but then he continued. "You really have it rough, Takanashi. *I* sure wouldn't want to have to play along with Andou's cringey nonsense. I mean, really, *superpowers*? Who would even *pretend* to believe in something like that?"

My concern lapsed into relief. It seemed that Sagami hadn't taken anything that he'd heard seriously. For once, Andou's chuunibyou had actually proven beneficial.

"Anyway, it was a pretty long conversation, but I think I got the gist of it all," Sagami continued. I was only half listening as I breathed a brief sigh of relief, but then his next sentence caught me entirely off guard once again.

"Basically, you're in love with Andou. Right?"

I felt my breath catch in my throat so suddenly and intensely that for a moment, I literally couldn't breathe. Sagami, on the other hand, smiled at me in the same vague and flippant way he'd been smiling that whole time, and carried on.

"You went over all sorts of quibbly nonsense to justify what you did—'be praiseworthy' this, 'atone for my mistakes' that—but in the end, it all boiled down to the fact that you wanted to be around the guy you fell for more than you wanted to be the president of the student council. That's all that really mattered in the end, right? You chose love over your dreams. It's a classic plot development."

My mind had gone entirely blank. The way he spoke made it sound like he thought he'd seen right through me, and it sent my emotions into a seething boil. Hearing him reduce everything that Andou and I had

agonized over into such a painfully simple conclusion was infuriating beyond all measure.

So why? Why was it…that I couldn't bring myself to say that he was wrong?

"Oh, speaking of which, I heard about how all you literary club people made Andou a game for his birthday. And I think *you* were the one who suggested it?" Sagami continued, speaking with an air of utter indifference. "Let me guess: you thought that if you wrapped all the others up into giving him a group present, you could make sure that nobody would try and get ahead of you by using their gift as an excuse to ask him out on his special day? You'd kill the competition by having everyone cross the finish line at the same time. Maybe you should've handed out some participation trophies while you were at it! I have to say, Takanashi, you really rigged this one up good."

I didn't say a word. I "rigged" it, he'd said. These days, people associate the word with scams, using it to mean "to give oneself an unfair advantage," but in its original usage, it just meant "to put something together," often in a makeshift way. As to which meaning he was using it in, well, I had already drawn my own conclusion.

"Oh, don't *glare* at me like that, Takanashi. It's such a waste of a pretty face. And please, don't get me wrong—I have absolutely no intention of teasing you. We're not grade schoolers, and I'm not interested in making fun of someone else's budding romance. To the contrary, I was hoping to help you."

"Budding…*romance*?" I repeated incredulously.

"Right. You see, I'm actually hoping that you and Andou hook up. I want *you* to end up with him."

Once again, I was reduced to standing there in silence. This time, though, it wasn't out of rage—it was due to the fact that I could not even begin to understand where his line of thought was coming from, or where it was going. Sagami paid my silence no mind, though, and carried on his monologue.

"Technically speaking, I'm going against my own personal policies by doing this. Speaking as a reader, I'm definitely out of my lane here…but that just goes to show how big of a payoff I think this could bring," Sagami said, his mild smile as steadfast as ever. "If you, the *obvious* least popular heroine in the whole cast, could end up winning Andou's heart…well, just imagine how novel and ever so slightly twisted of a rom-com that could make!"

I couldn't understand a word that he was saying. He just kept smiling at me—a smile so horribly natural, it came across as incredibly unsettling. I felt a sense of fear building up within me that I couldn't even begin to explain. "Who…*are* you, really?" I asked.

"Oh, just myself," said Sagami. "A simple reader who wants to see something entertaining and original, that's all."

I lapsed into silence once more.

“So, how about it? You, Takanashi, have fallen hard for Andou, and I’m offering you my help. Feel like accepting it? If you do, I’ll make *you* into the main heroine,” said Sagami, holding out a hand to me.

And what did I do?

I…

☆

I first met Hatoko after we got into high school. We’d spent a year together as clubmates, and we’d grown to get along really well with each other. She was a kind, pleasant girl, and simply being around her felt like it cleansed my cynical soul. She had the aura of a caring, affectionate mother, and I started considering her a close friend before I knew it.

Hatoko had a childhood friend. That friend was a boy, and an exceptionally lively one at that. He was also an irredeemable dumbass, and he also had a nasty case of chuunibyou, which—though I *really* hate to admit it—was probably why the two of us hit it off so well. Like, it was almost *scary* how well we hit it off. I’d actually met him once before, back during my own chuuni phase, but neither of us had told each other our names at the time. I only learned his after we happened to end up in the same high school club together. He was called Andou Jurai, otherwise known as Guiltia Sin Jurai.

“Can we talk about something sorta serious for a little?”

The two of us were alone in our club room together, and Hatoko had a really serious look on her face, which was a rarity for her. I took just a second to prepare myself, and in the meantime, Hatoko spoke up again.

“Oh, well, hmm. I guess it’s not really *that* serious?” she said.

Suddenly, I felt the slight tension that had been building up in me drain away again. “C’mon, make up your mind, girl,” I jabbed.

“Ha ha ha, sorry! I’m not really sure if it’s serious or not anymore,” said Hatoko. “I just wanted to gossip about love stuff with you a little!”

“A-About love?” I stammered. Okay, yeah… I’m not really sure whether or not that counts as serious either. Love, though? Seriously? I never would’ve expected Hatoko to bring up a topic like that.

“Hey, Tomoyo—do you have a crush on anyone?” Hatoko asked, leaning forward with a look of keen interest on her face. The way she was acting reminded me of something, and a second later I figured it out: she was behaving just like a kid gossiping with their classmates on the night of a school trip.

“N-N-Nah, I don’t. N-Not really,” I replied. This topic was waaay out of my comfort zone, and I’ve gotta admit, I was panicking pretty hard.

Ugggh, I just know I’m blushing right now… This sort of girl talk stuff just really isn’t my thing! I’m the sort of girl who feels most at home literally *at home, sitting in my room in front of my computer!* Again, though, I really was a little surprised. Frankly, I’d sort of assumed that Hatoko would be

just as uncomfortable about this sort of topic as I was. The two of us had *never* talked about love or crushes or anything like that before.

"Oh, okay," said Hatoko with a nod. "I do, though!"

Her expression didn't slip for a second. She had on the same smile as ever, as bright and cheerful as a sunflower in full bloom.

"I have a crush on Juu."

And time came to a screeching halt. It just stopped dead, in a far more profound and irresistible way than *Closed Clock* was capable of inducing. My breathing, my movements, even my heart—everything, and I mean *everything*, came to a halt.

"I really, *really* love Juu," Hatoko continued. *Juu*. That was what she called Andou. She was the only one who called him that. It was a special nickname, just for her. "I want to spend way more time talking with him. I want to go out into town and go shopping with him. I want to do all *sorts* of things in all sorts of places with him!"

"…"

"I want to spend every day with him. I want to make him breakfast every morning, and hold hands with him, and go on dates with him."

"…"

"I even want to try…k-kissing him," said Hatoko, blushing bright red and fidgeting bashfully.

As for me? I had *no* idea *how* the hell I was supposed to react to any of this. I couldn't even begin to guess what sort of face I was making. I wasn't cold at all, but I could still feel myself starting to tremble.

"Why…" I said, the word falling unprompted from my quivering lips. "Why…are you telling me this?"

At first, I thought she was going to ask for my help. I figured she'd ask me to step in and play cupid for her crush. It didn't take me long to figure out how wrong *that* assumption had been.

"Because you understand Juu better than anyone else," said Hatoko.

I understand *him?*

"And…because I'm the one who understands him the least," she continued, her smile taking on a tinge of sadness. "I understand him the least, and you understand him the most. So I know that I have to tell you this now, before anything else."

Hatoko was speaking in the same old voice she'd always spoken with. It was *her* voice, after all. But that said, the way she was forcing herself to push all the emotion out of her tone made that voice sound incredibly unnatural to me. She spoke in a way that sounded mostly detached, except for an ever so slight hint of tension and fear mixed in.

"I want to be his chosen one," said Hatoko.

"You…what?"

“I want Juu to choose me,” she repeated, her gaze taking on a certain sharpness that struck me as extremely unlike her. That pointed glint was wavering, though. It was the gaze of a girl who was desperately battling with her own worries and fears. The gaze of a girl who was forcing herself to stay in high spirits, even when she might break down in tears at any moment.

“I’ll ask you again, Tomoyo,” said Hatoko. “Do you have a crush on anyone?”

As the pressure of her words bore down on me, I finally realized what was *really* happening.

Oh, okay. I get it now. This is a declaration of war. She’s telling me that she’d never lose to a rival who can’t stand tall and declare her love.

Hatoko was asking me for my true feelings. She wanted to know the truth about Kanzaki Tomoyo’s innermost thoughts, which not even I myself totally understood.

And what did I do?

I…

☆

“A-Are you okay, Chii?”

Nice to meet you. My name is Kuki Madoka, and today, my best friend in the whole world, Chii, came over to my house to play. At first, she said that she was going to the literary club today, but then she changed her mind and came over to my place instead. Chii changing her mind at the last second was an everyday occurrence, so that didn’t seem like a very big deal to me. What did feel like a big deal, though, was the fact that something seemed *weird* about her.

Chii had looked really, really worried when she arrived at my house, and the first thing she said to me was, “I…think I might die.”

She was sitting on the couch in my living room, shivering with fear and squeezing her favorite stuffed animal, Squirrely, tightly in her arms. Speaking as her friend, I was worried sick about her…though she *did* finish off all the sweets I’d served her before I knew it, so she had an appetite, at least.

“Help me, Cookie,” Chifuyu moaned.

“Of course!” I replied. “It’ll be okay, Chii! You know I’m always on your side! You can tell me anything at all! What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been weird lately,” said Chii, raising a hand to her breast. “My chest…”

“What? Got bigger?” I guessed.

“No, it didn’t.”

“Oh, okay.”

“It’s the same as yours.”

“Oh. Okay…”

Well, now I’m a little sad. But no, it’s fine! That’s just for now. We still have the future to look forward to.

“I’ve been feeling my chest get all thumpy…”

“You mean…your heart?”

“It gets thumpy, and then it’s like it’s getting squeezed…and my face gets red, and I can’t focus…”

I was astonished. After all, I had a pretty good idea of what she was describing. It could only be one thing—there was no mistaking it.

“Chii…that means you have an irregular pulse!” I’d read about it in a book just recently, and the symptoms all matched up. *Oh no, this is awful! Chii’s really seriously sick!* “O-Oh no, oh *no*… We have to call a hospital right away!”

“Yeah…” muttered Chii.

“Hey, Chii, when does your chest start hurting? Is it when you wake up in the morning? Or right after you eat?” I asked.

Chii turned away from me. “When Andou…”

“Huh?”

“When Andou’s nearby. Or when I think about him. My chest gets really thumpy then,” said Chii. Her face was as red as an apple.

A flushed face is another sign of an irregular—no. No, that’s not it. This isn’t an irregular pulse after all.

“Cookie,” Chii groaned. She sounded like she was about to cry. “What should I do, Cookie? Am I sick? Am I gonna die…?”

“Chii…”

I’d read about this in a book too. It was love. It had to be. When she thought about a boy, her heart started pounding, and her face got all flushed… It *had* to be love. And she was in love with…

I gasped. Oh, no. Chii’s gone and fallen in love with a lolicon scumbag!

☆

“Achoo!”

Halfway to our school, I let out one *hell* of a sneeze.

“Oh, boy, here we go… Looks like the hosts of Hades are plotting my downfall all over again! And that means…it’s going to be *war*. How many lives will have their flames snuffed out on the battlefield this time, I wonder…?” I muttered to myself in the coolest friggin’ way possible, though I took care not to slow my pace as I did so. I had to get back as soon as possible—I’d feel really bad if I kept Tomoyo and Hatoko waiting around in the club room much longer, after all.

Oh, wait, though. Maybe I could just ask Hatoko to bring my bag back for me? That’d be a lot quicker for both of us. Ah, but on the other hand, I’d feel kinda bad about asking a girl to carry my bag home. Yeah, okay, I’d better go pick it up myself after all!

My resolve renewed, I set off once more, my path lit by the red glow of the sunset. I wasn’t even running, but my slightly faster than usual walking pace still had me a little sweaty. The faint buzz of cicadas echoed from somewhere far off in the distance.

My seventeenth birthday had come and gone, and July was halfway over. Summer was finally beginning in earnest, and once our final exams were done with, a fun-filled summer vacation awaited us. *What sort of summer are we going to have this year?* I wondered, and then I paused.

It was strange. For some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that this year's summer would burn hotter and brighter than ever before.

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Afterword

People are, on the whole, only capable of thinking from a subjective standpoint. Even if one tries to be objective in their opinions or their viewpoint, that so-called objectivity they strive for is nothing more than their subjective perception of what objectivity means. Even if a majority of people are willing to acknowledge something as the objective truth, that still doesn't mean that it is *truly* objective—it just means that a majority of people's subjective beliefs happen to line up with each other.

That's how I see things, anyway...but of course, all of that is nothing more than *my* subjective opinion. I can't say what is or isn't a universal truth or an undeniable reality. Of course, if you look at all of this from another perspective, then it means that every last person in the world is trapped within a prison of their own subjectivity...but, I mean, does that *really*... Yeah, okay, I'm done with this.

In conclusion: thinking about this sorta philosophical jazz on a daily basis makes me hella cool.

And now that that's over with, long time no see! This is Kota Nozomi. This volume centered around our cast's resident upperclassman, but boy, did it really feel like things sorta went off the rails right at the end! Really makes you wonder what's going to happen in the next volume, huh? And since I can't come up with a good segue, let's move right along into an announcement!

Get this: When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace is getting a manga adaptation!

The manga's scheduled to begin serialization this month (that is, July of 2013) in the magazine Comp Ace, and it will be drawn by Kousuke Kurose. First the radio drama, and now this! I couldn't be happier that this series is moving deeper into the world of mixed media. Speaking as the original author, I'm incredibly excited to see how the literary club crew and a certain big brother and his gang will be illustrated.

Now then, let's move on to the thanks! First, to my editor, Nakamizo: thank you once again for being such a big help this volume. While I'm at it, I should also thank you for seeking me out when I was all sad and alone at this year's award ceremony and helping me break my way into the social scene there.

Next: to 029. I know your schedule's been all sorts of busy lately, so thank you for once again providing such wonderful illustrations. I know that I have a way of coming up with some incredibly obnoxious requests each and every volume, and I'll never cease to be thankful for how you always manage to make them 120% as good as I was hoping they would be.

Finally, and most of all, thank you to all the readers who have kept up with this series all the way to the fourth volume!

And with that, may we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

KOTA NOZOMI PRES
ILLUSTRATOR: 029
★★★
ACE 4
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Hatoko
Combriver
Tomoyo
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la France
Chifuyu
Chifuyu Chifuyu
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of
Dragon FantaSY
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I am he who conquers chaos!
Are you sure about that? Don't blame me for what happens.
I take it that you've done everything you wanted to? You have nothing left to regret now? Good. In that case... I believe it's high time we moved on to an actual supernatural battle.
Dark and Dark vs. Route of Origin
The literary club's first supernatural battle begins!
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Bonus Translation Notes: On Ruby Text

There's an elephant in the room. It's been here this whole time, starting on literally the first page of volume one, and it will be present through to the very end of the series. That elephant's identity? Ruby text, a peculiarity of the Japanese writing system that is not directly replicable in English in any practical form.

Before I dig into what exactly I mean by all that, though, I have to establish a bit of linguistic context! First off, the Japanese writing system utilizes two phonetic lettering systems and one massive selection of characters more or less lifted wholesale from Chinese. The former are called hiragana and katakana, while the latter are called kanji. There are 46 characters in hiragana and katakana—48 if you count a couple archaic ones—and while it's not entirely clear *how* many kanji there are, the list of characters one needs to know to achieve basic functional literacy clocks in at a little over two thousand.

Further complicating matters is the fact that kanji's readings are context-dependent! The same kanji can be read in wildly different ways depending on what other characters are present around it. The end result of all this is that sometimes, either for the sake of contextual clarity or for the sake of providing a reading to a kanji you can't be sure your audience will be familiar with, it becomes necessary for Japanese writing to include clarification on how a particular kanji should be read.

Enter ruby text! This refers to small text placed parallel to the primary text that, in theory, would inform a reader of the phonetic pronunciation of the text it stands parallel to. (Imagine superscript-size text, but it lies above words instead of after them.)

As you may have guessed, Japanese literature has done plenty of experimentation with this feature of its writing. Indeed, ruby text is frequently used and abused as part of the chuuni aesthetic, and *Supernatural Battles*'s original Japanese text plays with it to humorous effect. Like, a *lot*.

The first and clearest example I can give happens to also be a good example of how chuuni fiction tends to use ruby text on the whole: the names of the main cast's powers! *Dark and Dark*, for instance, is written in Japanese using two kanji, "□□," meaning "black" and "flame" respectively. The ruby text written above those kanji reads "□□□□□□□□□," which is "dark and dark" in English, spelled out phonetically using katakana.

While the power names that Andou comes up with are certainly intended as parody to an extent, they're also really not that far off from the sort of thing you see in completely unironic chuuni fiction. The series *A Certain Magical Index*, for instance, features a power written as "□□□□" in kanji (meaning "fantasy killer," roughly) with the ruby text "□□□□□□□□□" ("Imagine Breaker") clarifying how it's meant to be read. Andou's naming

style is very clearly intended to be directly inspired by the sort of fiction he consumes, and even if he *weren't* name-dropping the series he likes absolutely all the time, the way he uses ruby text would give some pretty clear hints!

That's only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to *Supernatural Battles*'s use of ruby text, though—it also uses it to tell so, *so* many stupid jokes. The classic example of those that always springs to mind for me is a gag from volume 1 that you might remember: after Tomoyo impresses Andou with the chuuni-tastic nature of the title she thought up for herself, Andou calls her "□□" ("master"). Tomoyo tells him to stop it, and he then calls her "□□" again, only this time with the ruby text "□□□□ " (literally "master," the English word, in katakana) written over it. Tomoyo snaps at him, telling him to not "put ruby text on the word." That joke epitomizes the translator's dilemma: how on *earth do you* localize jokes that rely on a writing system quirk that your target language doesn't even have?

To address a different, smaller elephant that shuffled into the room over the course of the last couple paragraphs: I do not believe that including the ruby text as-is, with both the kanji and the reading translated into English and formatted like they were in the Japanese, is a good solution to this issue. The biggest and most important reason why I don't think that works is a matter of making sure the English version of the story delivers an equivalent experience to the Japanese. Carrying the ruby text over just wouldn't accomplish that, in my opinion. English doesn't *do* ruby text, so including it wouldn't come across as clever or referential in the way it does in Japanese—it would just be weird and confusing, *especially* for a reader not already familiar with all this linguistic context.

There's also the very simple fact that when you use ruby text with English writing, it looks, well, awful. I was *going* to work a joke into this section where I'd write "this" and then put "awful" above it in ruby text, and while I promise you it *would* have looked awful, there was the *other* issue of English word processors just not being built to format text like that. Successfully putting ruby text into the word processor I'm currently writing these notes in would be an ordeal, to say the least, and even if I *did* succeed, the odds of it making it into whatever e-reader you're currently viewing this book on intact are next to none. English ruby text is just deeply, *deeply* impractical on a technical level, and even if I didn't believe that carrying it over as-is would be unfaithful to the intent of the source material, it still just wouldn't be an option. My managers would kill me if I tried, and I would deserve it.

So, how *have* we been handling the ruby text in this series so far? By focusing on the same factor that rules out leaving it as-is: the text's intended effect! This can take a number of forms depending on context, so let's revisit those two examples that I gave back in the first half of this section.

First up, *Dark and Dark* and the rest of the power names! The intent is pretty clear for these: they're meant to evoke the sort of names that get used in chuuni fiction, and also to be comically over the top and a little bit *off* in that distinctly Andou sort of way. Our approach to these was twofold. First, in terms of the actual names that get thrown about on a regular basis, we decided to keep the ruby text readings as-is. This is a pretty common decision for chuuni novels in translation, and it definitely nails the slight awkwardness of Andou's naming style since his English is *just* off enough to come across as charmingly wonky.

What that *doesn't* cover, though, is the sheer over-the-top geekiness of the kanji that Andou chooses for his names, and that brings us to the second aspect of how we've been handling them: by expanding upon them and adding prefixes and descriptive phrases that capture the effect of the kanji whenever context requires them to have that certain *extra*-ness. You may have noticed that Andou sometimes refers to *Dark and Dark* with descriptors like "the stygian flames of Purgatory," and those are often—though not always!—instances of us working the meaning and tone of a term's kanji into the text in as smooth and natural of a manner as we can manage.

The jokes, of course, require a different sort of touch, and a very case-by-case one at that. Essentially, handling them is a process of figuring out what makes the joke funny, how the ruby text contributes to that humor, and then finding *something* else you can do that has an equivalent effect. In the case of the "master" joke, for instance, what really makes the punchline in my opinion is the slightly fourth-wall-breaking nature of Tomoyo's retort. There would be no way for her to tell that Andou was using ruby text in the way he does because spoken language just doesn't *do* that, so her calling it out comes across as comically absurd. Amusingly enough, the *Supernatural Battles* anime does include that gag, and gets around it by having the relevant text pop up in the background to keep the joke exactly as it is in the novel.

In that particular instance, our solution was to swap in a bit of fanciness that written English allows for and Japanese actually lacks: italicization! By italicizing the second "master," we not only carried over the aspect of the joke where Andou makes the word slightly fancier in a kind of silly and unnecessary way the second time he says it, but we also gave Tomoyo something to call out that she'd never realistically be able to hear if they were having a real, out loud conversation, preserving the fourth wall break as well. It certainly wasn't the only way we could've approached the gag, but it's a solution that I feel worked pretty well in that particular context!

And that's about all I have to say about the ruby elephant for now! We've had to deal with more silly names and clever wordplay than I can remember, and I'm very confident that won't be changing any time soon—in fact, it's about to get even sillier in the next volume. I hope you're as excited

about that as I am, but for now, we've got a boatload of references to contextualize!

Chapter 1

Isn't 'Sugita Genpaku,' like, the coolest friggin' name ever?!

Sugita Genpaku was a Japanese physician who was born in the early eighteenth century and died in the early nineteenth century. He's considered historically significant both for his place in Japan's medical history as well as his contributions to the field of translation! See Andou's Genpaku trivia and the next note in this section for more details.

Sugita Genpaku was the guy who translated the Tafel Anatomie, right?

The *Tabulae Anatomicae* is a medical text that was written by Johann Adam Kulmus at some point in the early eighteenth century. General information on the text itself isn't super easy to come by, and from what I can gather, the actual medical content of the text is mostly only relevant as a historical curiosity. Sugita Genpaku's translation of it, interestingly enough, seems to be the more common subject of study than the actual text itself these days! The Wikipedia page on the subject refers to it by its Japanese name, the *Kaitai Shinsho*, and spends significantly more time talking about the translation than the text proper. In that sense, Tomoyo calling Andou out on using the more obscure name is actually quite true to life, even in English.

Almost went and Spirit Integrated with the guy!

Spirit Integrate is a technique used by the shamans in *Shaman King*! The technique is a core feature of the story's power system, and it generally involves its users allowing spirits to possess them.

Have you fallen, apple?!

In this line, Andou is partially quoting a line spoken by Ukitake Jushiro in *Bleach*. The original line is "Have you fallen, Aizen?!" and Andou's description of the expression he makes while he says his version is more or less a paraphrasing of the circumstances that surrounded it—at that point in the story, Aizen had just betrayed Ukitake to go join up with the villains.

Oooh, Perry, is it? Mister Black Ships himself!

Despite the fact that Matthew C. Perry was an American, he's treated as a substantially more significant historical figure in Japan than he is in the Western world, for admittedly understandable reasons. Perry was a commodore in the United States navy who was sent on a mission to Japan in the 1850s. The Tokugawa shogunate was reigning over Japan at the time, and it had instituted a policy of almost complete isolationism from foreign countries (a policy often referred to by its Japanese name, "sakoku") that had been in effect for more than two hundred years. Trade with foreign nations was extremely limited during this era, and Perry's mission was to

convince the shogunate to open the country up to American trade—by force, if necessary.

To make a long story short, Perry's mission was a success, the country was opened up, and in the aftermath of that shift in policy, the shogunate ended up collapsing, prompting the very literal end of an era in Japanese history just slightly over a decade later (namely, the end of the Edo Period and the start of the Meiji Period). The "black ships" that Andou references, by the way, refer to the highly advanced gunboats that made up Perry's fleet in this particular instance, but the term itself apparently dates back to several hundred years prior, when the Portuguese first made contact with Japan.

That's the sort of thing you hear from kids who think you can actually fly by manipulating your chi!

This is a very straightforward reference to how characters fly in *Dragon Ball*! An interesting note is that the technique in question has a very specific name in Japanese that Tomoyo uses here, but the term in question has been translated in a vast number of different ways or—more commonly—glossed over entirely in official English translations of the series. As such, for the sake of maximum accessibility, we decided to localize it by describing how the technique is supposed to work rather than picking one of the many different ways its name has been rendered up to this point.

O-Oh, god, I only got four hours of sleep last night! Man, I'm so sleep deprived! Four hours of sleep, I swear!

This is one of those lines that required a very odd sort of localization! In Japan, it would seem that Napoleon was apocryphally believed to have only slept for three hours each night. All English sources I could find, meanwhile, cited the actual number as *four* hours, so we tweaked the line to make Andou's attempt at a historical reference more easily understandable. This probably goes without saying, but it's likely that neither number is actually accurate.

Queen Himiko.

Himiko is the name of a historical queen of what would eventually become Japan! Precisely who she was or what part of ancient Japan she ruled over are the subject of quite a considerable amount of debate, though—there's really not much in the way of primary sources regarding her. The oldest extant work of Japanese literature, the *Kojiki*, dates back to the early 8th century—over five hundred years after her reign—and doesn't even mention her. What little we know mostly comes from Chinese texts that are rather inconsistent and heavily debated in their own right. Scholars *mostly* seem to agree that Himiko did exist in *some* form, or at least that a person who fit her general role did, but the particulars are likely lost to time.

It's time for a Yamatai★Night Party!

"Yamatai★Night Party" is the name of a song by IOSYS, a musical dojin circle mostly known for their *Touhou* remixes and the animations that go along with them! This particular song is known for being featured in the *Taiko no Tatsujin* series of rhythm games, features lyrics largely sung from the perspective of Queen Himiko, and is also a *total* bop that I highly recommend giving a listen. It's also worth noting that in the original Japanese, Andou quotes a verse from the song's chorus rather than referencing its title—we decided to slightly shift the nature of his reference to give readers a fighting chance at tracing it back to its source, since the song is extremely obscure on the English-speaking internet, and a translated snippet of its lyrics would be completely impossible to make sense of for most of our readers.

The Tenpo Reforms...

The Tenpo Reforms were a set of political reforms addressing all sorts of concerns that plagued the late Tokugawa Shogunate. Enacted just about a decade before our pal Perry showed up to throw the country into chaos, it's pretty easy to forget about this particular blip in history given everything that went down so soon afterward. The Kyoho and Kansei reforms *also* took place during the late Edo period, and the idea that they'd be easy to mix up with the Tenpo Reforms is, frankly, extremely understandable.

The Tokugawa Shogunate...

We've alluded to this one a few times already so far! The Tokugawa Shogunate was basically the ruling government of Japan from the start of the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century (see the Perry entry, again). The shogunate was put into place by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the guy who came out on top of the Sengoku era after Nobunaga and Hideyoshi both kicked the bucket. Considering it lasted for two hundred and fifty years, it probably won't be surprising to hear that a *lot* of stuff happened over the course of the shogunate's existence, but all you really need to know to understand Andou's impression is that it was, eventually, overthrown. Note that the era when the shogunate was in power is usually called the Edo Period, named after the capital of the time (which would be renamed Tokyo shortly following the end of the era).

The Achaemenid Persian Empire...

The Achaemenid Persian Empire was an absolutely massive ancient empire that lasted for a few hundred years before Alexander the Great took over most of it! There's a whole lot of history surrounding the empire, but Andou clearly doesn't know any of it, and you don't really have to either to get the joke.

Zero points is just off the table, unless your name's Nobita!

Nobita is the main character of *Doraemon*, an absolute all-time classic manga and anime that's come up a few times before in previous volumes. One of Nobita's core character traits is the fact that he's a very, *very* poor student who somehow manages to score zero points on all of his tests.

She was perfectly fine with being the second dumbest creature in the world so long as I was the first. What are we, a certain grappler and his stupidly OP father?

This one's a reference to *Baki the Grappler*, an extremely over-the-top martial arts manga that came up once before back in volume 3! The characters Andou's shouting out in this line are Baki, the protagonist, and his father Yujiro, the primary antagonist and an absolute monster of a man. Yujiro is referred to throughout the series as "the strongest creature in the world," and the plot revolves in part around Baki's quest to earn the title from his father.

Oh, y'know Tao Ren's catchphrase, 'I shall not waver'? I thought that was so cool, I ended up learning all about that sort of archaic speech!

Tao Ren is another *Shaman King* character! He's notable for having a very distinct aesthetic thanks to his unique way of using kanji in his speech that gives him a cool, somewhat archaic flair. That distinct manner of writing is what Andou refers to having learned in the original Japanese text, and in lieu of including a detailed explanation of how it—and Japanese writing in general—works, we chose to spin the reference more around the effect and tone of his speech style rather than its linguistic complexities.

Y'know, it's written like the 'shura' in Oreshura!

Oreshura is the abbreviated name of *Ore no Kanojo to Osananajimi ga Shuraba Sugiru*, a light novel series by Yuuji Yuuji. If that name sounds familiar, it's probably because Kota Nozomi shouted him out for endorsing *Supernatural Battles* back in the afterword for volume 2!

Chapter 2

…her apron's pocket was stuffed with enough miscellaneous cleaning gear that you'd think said pocket was of the 4D variety.

The 4D Pocket is one of the signature tools of Doraemon (as in both Doraemon the character and *Doraemon* the manga). It's essentially a magical, infinitely spacious pocket that Doraemon pulls all of his ridiculous sci-fi gadgets out of.

Looking like Kakashi: hella cool!

Kakashi is a character from *Naruto* who's notable for keeping the majority of his face covered up by a mask and his ninja headband, which he wears more like an eyepatch.

Yes, it would remain Soft and Wet forevermore!

Soft and Wet is the name of the Stand used by the main character of *JoJo Part 8*! This might seem like a bit of a stretch to call a reference, but Andou's word choice in Japanese does make it very clear that he is, in fact, going for it on purpose. It's worth noting that unlike the source arcs of previous *JoJo* references, *Part 8* has yet to be officially translated into English. This is important because we've tried to use the official localization's names for *JoJo* Stands as much as possible up to this point, but in this particular instance, that's just not an option since there *is* no official English name for this Stand yet. As such, we've chosen to translate it directly, leaving the Prince reference intact.

Chapter 3

I, Andou Jurai, will now perform the transformation poses of every Heisei-era Kamen Rider!

The *Kamen Rider* franchise is a collection of many individual *Kamen Rider* TV series, and those series are broadly grouped together based on what era of Japanese history they aired in. There were nine *Kamen Rider* series in the Showa era, twenty-one in the Heisei era (counting *Kamen Rider Amazons*, an adult-oriented, ultra grimdark series that technically aired online), and three to date in the current Reiwa era, with a fourth that will have started a month ago at the time of this translation's publication.

Note that at the time this volume was published in Japanese, there were only fifteen Heisei series (*Kamen Rider Wizard* was nearing its conclusion at the time). That said, also note that Andou is performing the transformation poses of all the Heisei-era Kamen Riders, *not* each series' protagonist's pose. Since each series features multiple—sometimes *many*—Kamen Riders, and since each rider sometimes has more than one signature pose, doing all of them from memory would be both very impressive and excruciatingly time-consuming.

I was gonna go into my Rider Kick medley after I was done with these too...

The Rider Kick is another staple of the *Kamen Rider* franchise! It's a type of special attack that almost all Kamen Riders use some variation of. Typically, a Rider Kick involves the Kamen Rider jumping up into the air, then hurtling themself toward their enemy footfirst with a variety of flashy special effects accompanying the move. They're usually finishing moves, and they frequently prompt explosions. Note that the vast majority of modern Rider Kicks are comically impossible to pull off in real life, given their physics-defying nature, which raises major questions as to exactly what Andou was planning on doing if Sayumi let him go through with his plan.

Are you telling me to go find a stone mask to put on or something?!

It's time for another *JoJo* reference! This one traces all the way back to Part 1 and Dio's origins. At the very start of the series, the very first JoJo's father keeps an ominous stone mask mounted on the wall of his home. Dio, his adoptive son, discovers that the mask can turn people into vampires and eventually uses it on himself, giving up his humanity for the sake of power.

What're you laughing at?!

Andou's specifically quoting Uonuma Usui, a character from *Rurouni Kenshin*, in this line! Usui says this to Saitou Hajime shortly before their final duel to the death, which Hajime wins.

Chapter 4

□ Power Pros lets you make lefties into shortstops or catchers or whatever no problem.

Power Pros is an extremely long-running series of baseball video games. The series started out on the Super Nintendo in 1994 and proceeded to release at least one new game every year for the next two decades, its streak only being broken in 2015 (at which point it slowed down to a biennial release schedule). The series continues to this day, with modern releases coming out on the Playstation 4 and Nintendo Switch. In spite of its fame and popularity, very few versions of Power Pros have been released internationally, with the most recent English release being *MLB Power Pros 2008* for the Wii.

□ Mr. Fullswing had Tomaru play second base too.

Mr. Fullswing is a baseball manga by Suzuki Shinya that was serialized in *Shonen Jump* from 2001 to 2006. In spite of its popularity at the time, it never received an anime adaptation and was never published overseas, meaning that at the time of writing, there's currently no official way to experience the series in English.

□ I've heard that Loki's name's supposed to mean something like "Bringer of the End" too!

There are *many* theories regarding the linguistic origins of the name Loki, none of which have been proven accurate in any sort of definitive way. The theory that Andou references here isn't one that I was able to find any serious scholarly sources arguing for, though, so the odds are good that his knowledge of Norse mythology is somewhat tenuous.

□ Now I know how Yugi-boy felt when Pegasus screwed with him through his VCR...

This is, of course, a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* reference! The sequence in question involves Pegasus, one of the series' most well-known antagonists, sending Yugi a videotape through which the two of them play a magical card game. Yugi loses, and his grandfather's soul ends up getting stolen as a result. It's worth noting, by the way, that Pegasus *does* in fact refer to Yugi as "Yugi-boy"—in English—in the original Japanese, which I personally find delightful.

□ TOMOYO makes a desperate attack!

This particular line very deliberately uses the exact phrasing that the *Dragon Quest* series uses when enemies score critical hits on party members! Similarly, the sequence in which JURAI joins TOMOYO's party is a very direct pastiche of the sequences in which monsters join your party in *Dragon Quest*.

Chapter 5

‘Monkey! Where have you put my fleshlight?’ ‘I took the liberty of warming it by my breast for you, Lord Nobunaga!’

This is an allusion to a very well-known story involving Toyotomi Hideyoshi (or Monkey, as he’s referred to here—see below) and Oda Nobunaga. Hideyoshi was born as a commoner, but somehow (there are a few theories, none of them verified) ended up serving Nobunaga as his sandal-bearer. The original quote, as such, is about Nobunaga’s *sandals* rather than…the other thing. The “warming it/them by my breast” part is where the story comes in—supposedly, Hideyoshi impressed Nobunaga by being considerate enough to warm his sandals inside his shirt on a particularly cold day. The particulars of the story may be apocryphal, but it’s definitely true that Hideyoshi somehow impressed Nobunaga enough to rise in the ranks of his retainers, and he eventually ended up ruling over most of Japan after Nobunaga was assassinated.

As a side note, I’ve heard that the whole thing about Nobunaga calling Hideyoshi a monkey is actually a myth. Supposedly, he actually called him a balding rat.

Although Nobunaga having called Hideyoshi a monkey is a very widespread belief, this fun fact is actually true! Well, a number of seemingly respectable sources claim it’s true, anyway.

Delete it all like Mikami Teru deleting people!

Mikami Teru is a character from *Death Note*! He comes in toward the later stages of the story and eventually obtains a death note of his own. Tomoyo is specifically referring to his habit of muttering “Delete! Delete!” as he writes names in the notebook.

Something about it has, like…a sorta gap moé appeal, I guess?

We’ve gone over the concept of moé in a previous volume, but gap moé is somewhat distinct! To put it simply, the “gap” in gap moé refers to a gap between expectations and reality, and the “moé” part refers to how that gap makes the character much more appealing on the whole. Probably the most common example of this is a character whose appearance stands at odds with their behavior—the revelation that a big, burly, intimidating character arranges flowers as a hobby would probably have a gap moé effect on a lot of readers, for instance. In this case, of course, Andou’s referring to the gap between his impression of Sayumi and the way she actually looks when she’s at home.

I picked up your Pocari! You wanted the powdered kind, right?

“Pocari” is a shortened form of Pocari Sweat, a very popular sports drink in Japan. It comes both in bottles and as a powder that you mix with water

to reconstitute the drink. In terms of taste, I’d describe it as being subtly citrusy and less sweet than a lot of widely available sports drinks.

Chapter 8

I pondered whether our powers worked like in Yu-Gi-Oh!, where some Divine cards had priority over others—like how Obelisk's special ability wouldn't work on Ra.

This is very specifically how the Egyptian God Cards work in the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* manga! They do not have priority over each other in this manner in either the anime or the actual, real-world card game.

I guess if I wanted to try to make myself sound like some sort of hero, I'd say 'I've heard everything, and I'm here to help!'

The particular phrasing that Sagami uses here is likely in reference to a heavily memed line from the manga *Magazine Mystery Reportage*, or *MMR* for short, by Ishigaki Yuuki. The manga was extremely meta, starring characters who were modeled after editors at the magazine the manga ran in (that being Weekly Shonen Magazine, from 1990 to 1999), and revolves around those characters investigating paranormal mysteries. Unfortunately, the manga has never received an official English release in any form.

And with that, we're out of references from this volume! As always, thank you for reading, and see you again in volume five!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 4

Things I tried to make into my catchphrase when I was a student, #2: "Looks like I'm losing my edge."

I'd say it with an ever so slightly twisted grin, as if I were laughing at myself, and I'd incorporate a certain ironic edge, but it was all in a way that nevertheless implied I had some sort of grand, impressive backstory I was alluding to.

Actually...I guess I still say this one all the time nowadays, don't I?

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part-Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works) and *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan).

Step on me, Sayumiiiiiiiii!

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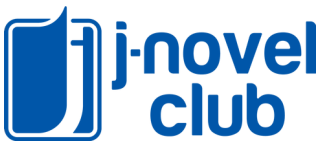

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